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WIDENER



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A decorative red banner with gold scrollwork and two crossed swords. The banner is the central element of the title design, with intricate gold scrollwork extending from its top and bottom. Two crossed swords, with gold hilts and pommels, are positioned behind the banner, their blades pointing downwards.

THE CAVALIERS

S·R·KEIGHTLEY

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"THE CAPTAIN WAS STANDING WITH HIS BACK TO THE FIRE-
PLACE"

[See page 24]

THE CAVALIERS

A Novel

BY

S. R. KEIGHTLEY

AUTHOR OF "THE CRIMSON SIGN"

ILLUSTRATED

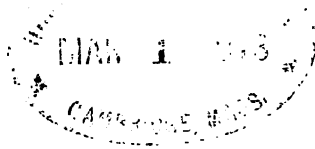


NEW YORK

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Dear Mr. Webb
Boston

TO
MY WIFE

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THE CAVALIERS.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE THRESHOLD: THE STORY OF MY YOUTH.

AN old man's memory is like a sea in the glow of sunset ; the distant horizon is brilliant with light and filled with the joy of colour, and far-off objects loom larger and out of proportion to those which are nearer and more familiar. The great adventures and gallant exploits of manhood run in an old man's mind like a tale told in a dream, but the bitter sweetness of youth—its innocent joys, its junketings and merrymakings, its childish sorrows and tragedies—the memory of these things grows more distinct and certain as the gliding years go by. For myself I can still hear the thunder of the ordnance, and catch the gleam of swords that rallied round a falling king, but the uneventful history of my boyhood in country scenes and sylvan paths is fresher and clearer than the manlier tale. I can still see the look in kind eyes that are long since dust ; I can hear the tones of voices that are long since silent for ever—nay, I can see the very roses by the doorway, the moss upon the thatch, the lowing kine under the beech trees, and the buttons on John Oliver's fustian jacket. Nor do I think my boyhood was happier and more eventful than that of most ; 'twas but a little gleam of quiet lying sunlit in an angry and agitated sea of struggle and of action.

I was sixteen years of age on the day of the peace of Prague. News travelled slowly in those days, but I had good reason to remember it, as the reader will presently learn, for a certain flogging had an edge to it that bit deep into my memory. I was the eldest of four, and caused more trouble to my loving mother's patient heart than all the others together. I would fain believe that this did not arise from any inherent viciousness, but rather from restlessness and levity that time has now abated. In justice to my father's memory I must set down that he did his best to correct the faults of my youth, but 'twas in his own way, and a hard one for a high-spirited boy to suffer patiently. His panacea was an oaken cudgel that hung from a leathern thong by the stable door, and the remedy was applied with abundant goodwill.

My father was a proud man in his own way, proud of his strength, his loyalty, and his ancient lineage. For though the Duncombes of Duncombe had somewhat narrowed their acres and straitened their fortunes in these later days, a Duncombe had fallen by Harold's side at Hastings, and others of the race had been found in the stubborn English ranks at Crecy and at Agincourt. It was only when he was raised with wine that my father spoke of these things. Otherwise he was a God-fearing, gallant gentleman who stood by Church and King, and strove to bring up his family in a pious regard and reverence for both. In later times I have met men whose religion was of so fine texture that it could be worn only on Sundays and holidays, but his was a plain, wholesome homespun that served him every day in the week. Precisian and Puritan he hated with as much goodwill as myself, though perhaps he had less reason for his enmity.

I can see him now as I write, with his red, cheerful face, and his blue eyes brimming with a certain merry humour that would set your heart dancing, a tall man like his descendant, but of far greater strength and endurance. But for the most part my father's strength

went to the peaceful husbandry of his fields, where the red poppies in the corn and the golden wheat moving like a sea of water in the wind, were the first sights I remember. Afoot in the early morning with his hazel switch in his hand, he saw to all the work with his own eyes, and dealt with his servants like an English gentleman who has good blood in his veins, and must live accordingly. These looked upon him as a prince of the blood in his own demesne, and would willingly have laid down their lives in his service, as some of them did for his son afterwards.

My father's great friend was Sir Austin Leigh of Beauchamp Hall, from whose estate Duncombe lay at no great distance. I never knew by what bond of secret sympathy they were drawn together, for Sir Austin was but a scholar whose eyes had grown dim pouring over his books, and in whom excessive study had weakened the strong pulse of self-reliant action. But there was no affair of moment in which he did not consult my father, and act upon his judgment. Sometimes, too, my lady, his wife, would call upon my mother, laying down the law upon the curing of cheeses, the management of children, and the training of servants, in such way that my sweet little mother would have willingly had the strenuous lady safe back at Beauchamp Hall again.

At this distance of time, through long years that are filled with crowded life, and the incidents of a great and memorable struggle, I cannot think or write of my mother without tears rising to my eyes. Oh, the wealth of love that lies deep in the mother's heart—love so untiring, love so full of sympathy, and rest, and perfect understanding, that there is nothing else like it in the world. Even after many years the world cannot drive its memory from the heart, but it follows us, when the gentle eyes we loved are long since closed, with a solemn benediction that brings back our lost youth again. I think the soldier's harness is not so hard, the politician's mind is not so full of affairs, nay, even the debauchee's heart

is not so cankered that, each has not in the quiet hours of his life drunk from the shadowy chalice that Memory holds out to him, of that sweet and precious affection once more.

To my mother's memory I owe this, that but thinking of her has upheld me in many temptations where I had perhaps otherwise fallen, at a time when my blood was hot, and my will undisciplined.

It grieves me much to remember how I plagued her with my boyish mischief, for we lads led a noisy and ungovernable household. As the eldest, it befitted me to set an example, but when followed it led most generally to flagellation and reprimand.

Philip came next to me, a quiet, shy lad with a scholar's face and spirit. Alas! the promise of his young life closed in the onset at Newbury, where he fell almost in his first youth, like a loyal gentleman fighting for his king. After him came Marjorie, who lived and died a spinster; and, lastly, my favourite Nance, who in after days married my friend, Sir Robert Hawkes of Ashworth, in the county of Hertford. She is a stately, white-haired lady now, but in the days of which I write she was a rosy-cheeked hoyden who delighted to ride Dobbin barebacked, and join with us boys in our boisterous sports.

Ours, as you can well guess, was a happy household, in which our youthful spirits had free play and scope, and our affections grew strong and tender under the fine discipline of love and trust. The great world lay far away; the dark shadow of coming times did not fall across our path. The prospects of the harvest, the festivities of Christmas, the news of the latest wrestling match, had far more interest for us than the doings of the King of Spain, or His Most Christian Majesty.

My brother and myself were sent early to school, for my father, though himself no lover of books, had a strong belief in the power of letters, and the strict discipline of the master's birch. Though I have since learned the quiet charm that lies in books, in

those days I hated them very devoutly. I have often sat by my desk on the long summer days hungering for the green woods, and the cool springs where the speckled trout were leaping. My dog-eared Gradus lay open before me, but my mind was far away with Towzer and the rabbits in Seven Tree Bottom, or the swan's nest that I nursed as a precious secret. I have often been rudely awakened from my day-dreams by the unwelcome swish of the ferula, and the nasal drawl of Master Twycroft.

"Thy swinish English brains will not bear the admixture of the generous Latin tongue, Tom Duncombe. Thou must live by thy hands, not thy head, honest Tom. For thine own good, and thy neighbours', I must flagellate thee, lest thou come to an untimely end."

And flagellated I was accordingly. That I endured as an incident natural to boyhood, a penalty that one must pay for being young, and I bore the burden of the rod with a good-humoured bravado that came in part from temperament and in part from habit.

I lay down my pen and watch, through the vista of all these years, Master Twycroft standing by his desk as the sunlight comes through the low windows of the schoolhouse, and the door lies open to the village green outside, where the pigeons are circling round the May-pole, and the beadle is driving Harry Doolittle's dun cow to the pound.

The master was a tall man, angular and full of many points. His legs were very long and thin, and his feet so large that they seemed to carry his body by their weight alone—that was my boyish fancy. His lean and sallow jaws moved visibly when he spoke, which he did slowly and with a slight drawl that used to move me exceedingly. I was ever impatient that he should make an end. His head was thatched with the lankest and blackest hair in the world, which fell at that time upon his shoulders, though afterwards he cut it quite closely. His nose was too obsequious for a schoolmaster, ill-fitting the *instans tyrannus* of the Delectus. A manner cringing

towards his superiors, overbearing towards his pupils, and ever pious and self-righteous, ill reconciled me to the stern discipline by which he had resolved to break my wilful spirit.

By what means I am unfitted at this distance of time to speak, he had gained a very great reputation as a scholar, and in consequence his school was much frequented by lads as well from distant parishes as from those that lay adjacent. On the whole, I incline to think he deserved his reputation, and had it not been for an inordinate love of strong ale he had not so long filled a situation so humble, and carrying with it remuneration so meagre. That love was (so to speak) the rock he split upon; it was the joint in his harness. I have seen him seated at his desk with his spectacles on his nose, his ferula lying harmless by his open book, sleeping off the effects of his morning potations, while we wilder spirits avenged our grievances by imaginary castigations of his person. In these interludes I fear I bore a chief part. I loved to imitate his tipsy gravity, his aggressive drawl, his measured walk. As I have said, I had to pay dearly for these frolics, but as I grew older and began to take on me the dignity of sixteen or thereabouts, I bore these too frequent castigations with an ill grace, and finally resented them in an unmistakable manner. The episode was memorable in that it terminated my servitude under Master Twycroft and left me to perfect my education in the great world.

My old friend and gossip (a friendship pregnant with honest love and respect), Percival Leigh, was the cause of this, as indeed he was of much else in my life. As the world knows, he was the only son and heir of the Sir Austin Leigh of whom I have written, and being of my own age, or something younger, was sent to the grammar school a little later than myself. To those who have since watched his career I need not say he has not followed his father in the retired paths of meditation, or the pursuit of the abstract sciences which win a man from action. Already in

his early youth he showed signs of those qualities which have since distinguished him in the great world. Courageous, frank (here my old friend may have abated somewhat), dexterous, and full of swift enterprise, even as a lad I remember him a ringleader in our youthful exploits. In these days he was a bright-eyed lad with brown ringlets clustering round his head, and at times a look in his eyes that in my old memory brings back the softer glances of his sister Melody. It is certain that Master Twycroft spared him no more than he spared myself, and it may be that we were first lovingly drawn together by the common misfortune of inordinate flogging. But while I bore my punishment without complaint—even somewhat cheerfully—my less patient companion groaned bitterly, and as he grew out of his boyhood resented it mightily. Then it came about that I ended it altogether and my education with it, for which I was heartily thankful at the time.

It fell out in this way :

Hard by the grammar-school was the village church, with its tall spire lifting clear into the sky above the elms and sycamores that grew thick in the quiet churchyard. Three counties, we lads used to say, a man might see from the summit of the steeple—three counties, and it might be a faint glimpse of silver sea across many a mile of wood and corn-land, though this, as I soon learned, was but fable. I had stolen once and again upon the platform of the tower and gazed wonderingly up the rough masonry, tracing an adventurous path to the giddy pinnacle. To climb where none had climbed before grew with me into a passion that I kept locked up in my own heart, till one June day, prompted by I know not what instinct, I determined to put my wild project into instant execution.

I had been watching from the windows of the schoolhouse the vagrant rooks holding their parliament about the steeple, watching them a half hour or more with eyes that turned in spite of me from the Terentius lying open upon my desk. The

spirit of revolt was busy within me ; revolt and disdain, for I had that morning, following ancient custom, submitted to a thrashing more than ordinary for an offence of which I stood guiltless, videlicet—the drawing of an effigy of Master Twycroft in the act of draining a quart measure, with some opprobrious words written underneath. In vain I had (as I very well remember) protested that I was innocent—Percival Leigh being the culprit—and then bent my back to the storm.

As I sat at my desk gazing furtively from the window, I still tingled with the strokes of the ferula—what boy of spirit has not ?—and burned with a sense of injustice that was new to me, for hitherto, I am fain to confess, I had merited all, and more than all I suffered. Then in a moment my resolve took form and body—no longer to submit to a servitude so idle and so harsh, as I then deemed it, but to take my manhood upon me, and to testify its taking up by an act that should be remembered while Beauchamp School had boys to flog. Almost before the thought was conceived I had closed my hated books, risen from my desk, and amid a hush of expectation and fear, walked soberly up the room to where Master Twycroft was solemnly watching the untrussing of the real culprit, for whose offence I had borne punishment.

He eyed me very sourly.

“Thou hast not come to reason yet, Tom Duncombe,” he said ; “reason and thou wert ever strangers ; but, peradventure—”

“Peradventure, sir,” I cried, interrupting him rudely, “will never come to pass ! You have flogged me with reason and without reason, but with or without you will never flog me again. I am come with, very good will to take my leave of you, for I wish you no evil. Nay !” I continued, for I could perceive he meditated an attack, “if you move but a foot I will break you like a hazel twig. I have borne too much and will bear no more.”

We stood face to face, as if measuring the strength the one of the other, but my old master showed no sign of fear or indecision, though he must have known I was twice the stronger and full of spirit. Perhaps I should have yielded from habit, and got me peacefully out of the encounter, but for the laughter and whispering of the lads, who forgot their terrors in the excitement of the great moment; for an event had happened in Beauchamp School. The fumes of popularity rose in my brain; I cared for nothing save the applause of the hour.

Then Master Twycroft advanced and took me by the shoulder. Hardly knowing or caring what I did, for my blood was up, I threw off his grasp, and with a good stout blow felled the poor dominie to the ground. He uttered no sound as he fell, and I verily believed that I had killed him; but at the moment I hardly cared for the consequences. I was, as it were, *caput lupinis*. By this act I had placed myself beyond the pale, and, in my young imagination, felt for the moment as though I had shaken off the trammels of all restraint. None dared to stay me. I made my way with a fine bravado through my admiring school-fellows, who, however, fell away from me, as though unwilling to approve the deed, or abet me by their countenance. I cared not for that, or seemed not to care, but went whistling across the village green towards the church that stood on a little gentle hill hardly a gunshot off.

The churchyard was an ancient haunt of mine; the only book of history that at that time—strange as it may seem—I cared to read, and the historian who writ its gruesome pages—the parish grave-digger, I mean—was my familiar gossip. But Jeremy was not compiling his calendar on this fair June day, and the church door lay open. Outlawed as I was by my late rash act, and like to suffer grievous punishment, I had made up my mind to the adventure whereof I have spoken, and do, as I conceived, a great and memorable deed. There was no one to stay or ques-

tion me. Invitingly the door lay open ; I knew my way up the winding belfry stair, past the tomb of old Sir Marmaduke, who had fought at Stamford Town and now lay frowning in his marble shroud.

Standing on the tower, the village lay still beneath me. Only the barking of a stray dog and the angry chatter of the rooks, broke the pleasant stillness. Far away I could see across the woods and beyond the silver waters of the Axe, the red roofs of Duncombe, and the cattle—mere specks they seemed—in the meadow by the mill.

How quiet was that pastoral scene ! how still that summer air ! but within my young bosom what a raging storm of passionate insurrection ! Between myself and that quiet world had grown a great gulf, which it seemed to me would never again be bridged. Ah me ! how real are the tragedies of youth ; how dark, if transient, is the gloom, how hopeless is the grief, how bitter the despair ! The sorrows of our riper days are borne with a calm and equal mind ; experience teaches there is no trial the heart cannot bear, nor any night that morning does not follow with healing, and perhaps with happiness. To me, then, the world was wholly dark, dark and lonely, for I felt that I stood alone in my lawless solitude, outlawed and aliened by one hasty blow, born of idleness and vanity. I say that I set the world at defiance—my little world that was bounded by Duncombe and Beauchamp School—and from one heedless folly proceeded to another that had long been premeditated.

Placing my jacket on the parapet, and casting one defiant look upon the rough stonework, round which the ivy had wreathed itself with strong and pliant arms, I set out upon my upward journey. As I write in this the peaceful autumn of my life, I can feel again the emotions that shook my young heart, the passions that drove me, the spirit of defiance that nerved my hands and braced my sinews to my perilous and foolish task. With every step that I ascended

I left my grief behind; *atra cura* loosened her hold upon me, vanishing into that blue air where never a cloud was sailing. Here the tendrils of the ivy gave me hold, there a friendly ledge or buttress. I clung to those frail supports with all the strength of my young ungovernable spirit, with no thought of danger and no heed of disaster. The colony of startled daws that had their lodging there flew round me with a mighty fluttering of wings and clangorous cawing; nay, one, the patriarch, I think, of all that volant parish, approached so near that I caught the gleam in his wicked eyes, and felt upon my cheek the stir of air from his passing wings. Once and again I cried aloud in my passionate exultation, like one scarce having full possession of his faculties, a cry of derision and disdain. Upward and still upward, with unabated zeal I crept from point to point, never daring to look beneath, but ever with an upward gaze at the hoped-for haven of my desires.

But as I ascended, my footing grew more and more insecure, my arduous task more difficult and dangerous. Then I came upon a ledge, left I know not for what purpose by the builders, and here I rested to recruit my strength. My hands were torn and bleeding, my feet tingled with the pain of climbing, and but once looking down from that giddy altitude, my head began to swim. Then through the still, sweet air I heard the murmur of many voices from below, and my own name called, as it seemed, by a thousand tongues. I knew now that my perilous ascent was marked by all the world, and had I thought of turning back before, 'twas out of the question now. Tom Duncombe who had fought the calender's man three several times, and at last carried away the spoils of victory; Tom Duncombe who had robbed more orchards than any dozen lads in the four parishes; Tom Duncombe, finally, who had broken his master's head, had rather die than turn his back on his half-completed task. Therefore again onward, honest Tom, though the wall yonder

grows smooth and bare, and thou seemest to cling like a fly by very suction.

How it was done I do not know, but it was done at last—with a great lump in my throat and my young heart knocking loudly in my bosom. At that moment I experienced such sense of delight and pride as I have not felt in all my life; nay, not even when the martyred Charles, my king and master, laid his royal sword upon my shoulder and spoke the noble words that will be written in their place.

Here I found room to rest and enjoy my short-lived triumph. As yet the first great glow of passion had not died away; that came afterwards, as bruised and bleeding I clung to the wall in my descent, and despaired of ever again touching earth alive. Hours, it seemed, I hung there, scarce daring to relax my hold, like one clinging to his last despairing chance, and finding that, too, slipping from his grasp. But the Providence that watched over me in my ascent vouchsafed the same kindly care as I descended, though then, boy as I was, methought I owed it all to my own strong arms and intrepid heart. Certainly there was no prayer of thanksgiving on my lips, nor yet any heroic spirit in my breast, as I again stepped upon the platform of the tower and drew my coat upon my back. When the deed was done I was no longer proud, but only wishful that the past with my late folly might be blotted out, and that I was again at peace with all the world. For I now saw the consequences with a clear and sober mind—my father's wrath, my mother's grief, and the end of all my careless life. The thunder-shower had spent itself; the volcanic lightning had passed palpitating into darkness.

I hardly heard the fierce objurgations of Dr. Ringwood when he met me at the churchyard gate; hardly the greeting of my good Percival Leigh, who in presence of them all threw his arms about my neck and sobbed upon my shoulder. *Meminisse juvat* after all these years, my lord of Beauchamp. I would be alone with the dark passions of my young heart, and

hurried to the riverside by woodland bypaths, where I laved my hands and face in the sweet running water, and threw myself down, a tired, hopeless lad, among the cowslips on the bank.

It was late when I returned home, creeping to the door like another prodigal, though with no expectation of any fatted calf. From my mother's parlour I caught the sound of girlish laughter as I hurried swiftly and secretly to my own room, where I flung myself on the bed and turned my face to the wall. There was no part for me in the household joy. To me, lying there alone, that summer evening was of endless length, as the shadows lengthened and the thousand sounds of country life grew hushed and still. By and by one of the maids brought me some supper, whereof I partook listlessly, though I had not tasted food since noon; and then I fell asleep. When I awakened it was quite dark, only a candle burned upon the table, and my mother's arms were around my neck. There were tears in her eyes—tears, and a look of unutterable love. Then, no word coming to my lips, I sobbed out my sorrows upon her bosom, and in that sweet, encircling love felt rest and peace stealing by degrees into my tired, agitated heart. A long time she sat there in silence, speaking only with her eyes, and her soft touch upon my forehead. Ah! sir, I also have known the intrigues of camp and court, and the stern joy of the hour of battle, but for your very manhood's sake your heart becomes, as mine does after all these years, as the heart of a little child when you think of scenes like this. I had returned home.

I could only sob out my grief and shame, and contrition.

"Sweet heart," she cried, her dear eyes filled with tears, "your own heart has spoken. I have no words of anger or reproach, only love and sorrow for my son whose tears are tears of penitence. We do wrong and suffer, Tom."

"I know I have done wrong," I answered. "I will try and suffer bravely."

"'Tis not the suffering, but the sin, that we should fear," she said, gravely. "Has my boy given thanks to God for all His care in this day of his transgression?"

"Mother, mother, I dare not pray."

There are spots too holy for the feet to tread: hardly memory, with bowed head and shaded eyes, can enter, and this is one of mine. I cannot tell how the heart of the boy was laid bare on that gentle bosom; how the two knelt together in the stillness of that quiet room; how the last kiss from those sweet, maternal lips brought composure and peace after the angry storm. In this silent study, when my grandchildren are gone to bed and only the shadows are moving in the room, I retrace the ancient page again and rise sighing—an old man's sigh—for one draught of the golden cup of youth.

I had half forgotten my grief in the morning, only John Oliver came with a message that my father was waiting for me in the porch. In John's eyes there was an inward twinkle that I knew meant mischief; he loved me, but he dearly loved to see me flogged. I knew it was no time to keep my father waiting; therefore hastily straightening my curls, I clapped my hat upon my head, and came quickly to the door with a shamefaced air. Here was my father mounted upon Dapple, switching his riding-boot with his whip, and a sour look upon his red, good-humoured face.

He looked at me steadily for a minute as I stood in the sunshine on the steps.

"We are going to school together, sir."

I made no answer; I had none to make. Then he set Dapple in motion, and rode slowly down the avenue, where the path was all flecked with sun and shade, and the rabbits scampered hurriedly from side to side. He kept well before me, nor ever once looked back to see that I followed. So he rode for a mile and a half, I trudging behind, till we came to the bridge across the Axe that leads into Beauchamp Town. Thereafter he went more slowly, till he crossed

the village green, and stopped short at the school-house door. There he sat waiting till I came up, when he pointed sternly with his whip :

"If you are son of mine, and your mother is an honest woman, you will know what to do."

I had been at the point of rebellion, chafing under this great indignity, but his last words broke my spirit, though my lips, I think, were firmly closed.

"My mother is a thousand times too good for both of us, sir," I said, forgetting myself for the moment ; he had never spoken thus before, nor, indeed, had I.

Then I left him, for I knew his mind as well as if he had spoken the words, and since I have come to think upon it, I believe he knew mine. There was a mighty hubbub for a moment as I entered the school-room, and then a great expectant hush. With my hat in my hand, I only kept my eyes in front, and walked soberly up the room till I came to the master's desk, the dominie himself looking as if he had seen a ghost. Here I stopped, making my best bow. Master Twycroft took off his spectacles, and caught up his ferula as if in self-protection.

"I have come, sir," I cried, "to seek your pardon. I thought you had used me ill, but 'twas wrong to strike you as I did, and I am sorry for it."

The dominie put his hand to his forehead ; there was a shrewd mark where I had struck the old rogue.

"You will make an ill end yet, Tom Duncombe," he said, still apparently mistrustful of my purpose, and fearing my sweet speech was only a trap. "Hanging is thy lot, Tom Duncombe. A wayward scholar, a corrupter of morals, a foul example, I will not have thee longer for a pupil, and have prayed your father, who is an honest and worthy gentleman, to take you home."

"I may be all you say, sir," I answered, speaking up as bravely as I could, "but if I do an injury I can say that I am sorry for it. Nay, more"—and here, moved by I know not what impulse, I took off my

jacket—"I can bear the punishment for it too. I pray you flog me, sir."

"This is out of all reason," cried the poor dominie, utterly perplexed by this astounding request. "Thou who wouldst bear the yoke no more than an untrained colt; either this is but a piece of thy mumming, Tom Duncombe, or the adventure of yesterday has turned thy brain."

"Neither the one nor the other, sir. I who could twist you like an osier struck you a foul stroke. You will see that I am in a serious mind. But I pray you flog me quickly."

"With all my heart," cried the dominie, "for if ever a lad needed flagellation 'tis surely thou. I have broken more rods over thy back, and to less purpose, than one would venture to believe. I will flog thee while thou art in the mind, though thou art indeed a lost sheep beyond the reach of grace."

Doctissimus Twycroft was as good as his word, and I had a score of reasons, good and sound, for remembering that flogging for many a day. I think now it was harsh and savage, but I set my teeth, and bore it without a murmur. Once he paused, either to take breath, or to inculcate precept with example, I remember not which after this lapse of time. And then I heard the voice of my father, who had stolen quietly up:

"You must not spare your hand, good master. For his soul's sake, and your own, you must not spare the lad. 'Tis his last flogging, and I would have him remember it."

Then under my father's eyes I was horsed again, till I began to think my punishment would never come to an end. But I made no murmur, being resolved in my young mind to suffer all with patience. At length the dominie ceased from sheer exhaustion, and sat himself down to recover breath.

When we got into the open air again—my father and I—I was sick and faint, though I kept a brave heart under my jacket, feeling that I had borne my-

self with fitting dignity and fortitude. Outside the school door my father stopped, the stern look that he had worn quite gone, and his eyes filled, as I know now, with a look of pity and of pride. He held out his hand to me, and perhaps his voice shook a little as he spoke.

"I forgive thee, Tom, with all my heart ; thou art a fool, I think, but, gadzooks ! thou hast in thee the making of a gentleman. I would not have missed this day's work for the best crop that ever was harvested."

From that day forth my father treated me no more like a boy, nor did he ever, save once, and that was on the last day of his life, speak of the manner in which I won for myself, to speak in set form, the *toga virilis*. He was dying then, the brave, ruddy face white and drawn, and the strong fingers clutching at the coverlet. He had not spoken for a long time, like one almost sunk in a deliquium. We had drawn round his bed—the wife and sons and daughters of this loving father and gallant gentleman—watching the slow approach of the great shadow moving into light. Suddenly, with reason in his eyes, he laid his hand upon my mother's—

"Tom will be both son and husband to thee, gentle heart," he said, "when I am gone. He has sense and spirit—sense and spirit." Then he seemed to lose himself again.

"Schoolmaster, thou art bearing too hard upon the boy ; birch was never laid upon a braver. And to ask thy pardon—I love thee, lad. Kiss me." The brave life was nearly over then, the tale was nearly told ; but I knew then how my father's heart had been touched by what had been merely the prompting of a young and wayward spirit.

It was not my purpose to write thus much of my youth when I first began, but unconsciously my old memory grew clearer as the scenes of my boyhood rose before me. How clear ! how sweet ! The pastures are stretching green and dewy in the morn-

ing sun; the air is full of summer scents, and the boys are shouting on the village green. For a while I was a boy again.

Writing in such wise these memoirs would never come to an end, or, it may be, would grow under my hand to the size of that *La Cléopâtre* which my wife would weep over when we were first married. But I have no such purpose as the industrious *Seigneur de la Calprenede*, nor will I longer dwell upon scenes that, however precious to me who write, cannot be of great interest to you who read.

As I have said, my father treated me no more like a boy from the time that I left Beauchamp School, but would carry me to markets and quarter sessions, and sometimes, though this was seldom, to dine with his fellow justices afterwards. All this while, his friend, Sir Austin Leigh, was moving him that I should go up to the university, to which course I was not ill-disposed, for I had a mind to see the world, though, it may be, little head to make way therein. At all events, being not yet nineteen, I was entered at St. John's College, Oxford, where I had as tutor one William Cartwright (the hooded crow we called him, though I do not know why), with whom I hit it off but ill, for I had no ambition to be a fellow of my college, nor any wish to spend my nights in pursuit of the vague phantoms of metaphysic. Rather, and let me confess it with shame, the bowling-green was my lecture-room, the tennis-court my cloister, and the tavern, with its jolly fellows and midnight catches, my study and academe. Still I learned something that was not altogether amiss—the human-hearted cynicism and cheerful gaiety of Horace, the generous fire that glows in the verse of Homer, the caustic wit of Aristophanes, and the splendid fervour of Augustinus. These are still my friends, and I still love their faces. Time alters them not; they do not grow older; only the voice grows clearer and the meaning deeper than when I was a lad. It was now also that I first learnt the greatness of our English speech, and the power of

those fine wits, who have used it to such noble ends.

But for the most part I was an idle lad, fitter for a frolic than for study, a surer hand at the foils than at dialectics, and a lover of choice company rather than of grave masters. Three years I spent thus idly, when one morning in May the news came to me, sitting in the little garden behind the Swan, where I played at cards, that my father lay a-dying, and that he would see me before he went. Overcome by my feelings, I left my comrades and my cards lying on the table, and quitted my gay company without a word. I never drew bridle, travelling day and night, till I reached the gates of Duncombe, and roused old Anthony at the lodge to learn that my father was yet alive. I remember as though it were yesterday, how I met my mother in the hall, how we went up the staircase together hand in hand, and how my father's face lighted when his eyes fell on his first-born son, unworthy as he was.

These things also are of my youth ; their memory is clear and fresh. For three years afterwards I stayed at home, idly thinking my travels were over, and that henceforth I should live quietly at home as my father had lived before me. But suddenly, or so it seemed to us, who took but little heed of the great world beyond our quiet lives, the storm broke, and all England was in arms. Of that great quarrel in which a royal head went down, we hardly knew the cause ; it was enough for us that the king had called his loyal subjects to his side. Philip went first, and then the time came when I also left my quiet fields, and rode away like many a better man.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST PLUNGE.

ONE afternoon in the late autumn of 1644, being anxious for news, I rode towards Beauchamp Town. No post had come with tidings for a week, only vagrant rumours that a battle had been fought, and the king's affairs had gone very ill.

During all this time I had been but moody and discontented. While others had been winning renown, I had been playing goodman John at home; while the merry lads of Lunsford and Rupert were fighting for the king, I was fain to be content with spring sowing and autumn reaping—I who loved a good blade and gallant horse better than anything else in the world, and felt in my veins the fighting blood of far-off ancestors. At first I had not greatly murmured. When the king had raised his royal standard, though omens were not wanting, we, who knew no better, had thought his march would be a regal progress, and a month or two would see the insolent Parliament at his feet. We had vainly imagined that nothing could withstand the royal arms (so revered was the name of king), and we waited with a sense of certainty for the news of splendid victories. But the news did not come; rather we heard week by week how rebellion gathered head, how the Parliament had secured the ports and gathered levies and supplies, and how the king had only the devotion and courage of his faithful people to help him in his quarrel. As yet the tide of war had not rolled down our quiet valley, though many gentlemen had ridden away to join the king, among them being my brother Philip

(late come from Oxford) and Percival Leigh, both setting out together.

For myself, I had felt the trust committed to me by my father had tied my hands; my honour held me fast. So I chafed and murmured, listening eagerly for news, and riding daily to the town in hopes of catching the latest rumour of the king at Oxford and the gallant doings of the army of the West. When word was brought of how the Cornish die-hards charged the hill at Stratton, but little more had sent me riding to the wars.

So I rode, as I have said, toward Beauchamp Town, the reins lying loose on my horse's neck, and my mind moody and ill-content. The autumn woods had caught a thousand tints; the fallen leaves were lying deep upon the road. Through the damp, warm air came the murmur of the river, swollen with recent rains. I rode slowly till I came within sight of the bridge over the Axe, a hundred yards in front of me, and here I stopped short. For close by the bridge I caught sight of three troopers, the sunshine flashing on their steel corslets and head-pieces, and their horses, that seemed jaded and weary, drinking from the stream that ran at their feet. They were so busy with their horses that they did not see me, and for a while I sat watching them, wondering on what errand they had come. I did not doubt they were Parliament men, and I was debating the wisdom of quietly returning the way I had come, when one of them suddenly looked up and caught sight of me there on the road. I heard him call out to his comrades, and almost before I could gather the reins in my hands, they had leaped upon their horses and were riding down the road to meet me. Retreat was therefore out of the question, so assuming an air of careless unconcern, I touched my horse with my heel, and rode slowly forward. They drew their basket-hilted swords as they dashed up, only reining in when they were within a few paces of me.

"Stand, friend," one of them cried, leaning forward

and catching at my bridle, "stand and tell us your errand."

"An honest one, surely," I answered quietly, though had the riding-switch I carried been a more serviceable weapon, I had not made reply so neighbourly. "To learn the news and drink a glass of ale at the White Hart is all my business."

"Truly, I think thou art a malignant by thy speech, loving gossip rather than grace, and tankards of October rather than the vials of the spirit. We will see that Captain Faithful gives you the news at the White Hart."

"I have no business with Captain Faithful, whoever he may be, nor with you," I answered, sorely nettled. "I pray you let me ride upon my way peacefully, or let me see your warrant for this work."

"An excellent good warrant, four feet long, new edged but yesterday," he answered, returning his sword blade to the scabbard, and smiling only with his lips at his seasonable jest. "There are other warrants here with a louder note, but I think this will serve for the present."

"No reasonable man would gamsay its virtue. I will see your captain; though what he would say to me I cannot see. This is a peaceful neighbourhood."

"A blind and wayward generation, though haply one or two righteous men may be found among you. But the sound of the wind is in the tree tops. The harvest is ready, and the reapers are come to garner it."

"Ay, and to burn up the tares with unquenchable fire," added the second, with a very sour visage, in a deep, nasal tone.

"You have mistaken your trade, gentlemen," I rejoined cheerfully; "'tis hardly fair to preach to me when I cannot make the fitting responses."

"Out of his own mouth do we judge him," cried the first trooper. "He has spoken with his lips; he has digged his own pit. Truly, I will ride with him to the town, and let the godly captain see to it. Be of good

courage, and see that no one pass or repass while you keep your guard here. Now, master, let us ride forward together."

I had a good will to have broken the fellow's head had it been in my power, so smoothly did he roll the words under his tongue as though he enjoyed their flavour. But having no weapon, as I have said, and not liking the way he fingered his sword hilt, which showed he had the knack of using it, I repressed my inclination and rode forward at his side with the best grace I could muster. The other two again took up their position by the bridge, watching us over their shoulders as we rode away.

I had a great curiosity to know on what errand the troopers had come to Beauchamp Town, and endeavoured to draw some information from my companion, but I wholly failed. However skilfully I put my questions, they were as skilfully parried, his wit in these matters being far greater than mine. I could learn nothing from him either of the purpose of their journey, or the place they had come from, though I spoke of the state of the roads and the condition of the horses which, indeed, seemed almost foundrous.

After a while he eyed me grimly. "A close tongue speaketh a wise head. You have put many questions, and got your answer to them all. Now let me say my word, which will be brief, and no less to the point. When the children of the promise entered into their inheritance, they slew the Amorites and the Hittites from Misrephoth to Mizpeh; they put the Jebusites to the sword, they set their house in order, and drew their lines close about them. I, Ezekiel Hopgood, whom men call Stand-by-Faith, though but a rotten branch of the precious vine, serve the same master, and obey the same call. I will hold no parley with the uncircumcised. Therefore, friend, put no further question, or your answer will be of another measure."

The fashion of this speech was not altogether new to me, but I liked it none the more for that, and I had perhaps been tempted to reply had we not by this

time ridden into the market-place over against the White Hart, and so into the middle of the town. Here the sight was very stirring and novel. In the centre of the place were twenty-five or thirty horses being fed and watered, the men bringing the hay from the inn stables in their arms, and a crowd of idlers all mouth and eyes, watching them as they came and went. Before the door of the inn a long table had been set out, on which the tankards and dishes were still spread, though the meal was over. What struck me most, I think, in the scene before me was the order and quiet with which the men did their work. There was no rough play or confusion, idling or laughter. These men went about their business very soberly.

We rode up to the door of the inn and there dismounted. Jack Ostler, who was standing by the door, touched his cap to me and made to take my horse, when my friend Ezekiel roughly bade him to be gone. " 'Tis a stout beast," I heard the latter say to one of his comrades who had come up on our halting, "with speed and full of bottom. 'Twill make a good mount."

At the time I paid little attention to this speech, but followed him into the inn with such look of unconcern as I could assume. As I entered the room the captain was standing with his back to the fireplace, which I remember was filled with green branches of fir, his legs widely apart, his hands behind his back, and his head bent a little to one side as though listening attentively. Seated near him, but with their backs to me, were two or three of the townsmen, one of whom was referring to a roll of paper.

The evening was growing dark, and I could not see the speaker's face, but I had known the voice among a thousand. It was the voice of my old schoolmaster, high-pitched and monotonous, as I remember. So intent were they all upon the words that were being spoken that they had not noticed our entrance, or had not thought it worthy of attention. The speaker therefore went on:

"He has much substance, but is idle and wasteful.

For the rest he is an Antinomian, and indifferent to the cause. But the next upon my list"—here the speaker paused and looked up for a moment at the soldier—"hath another and different complexion, and must be dealt with *manu forte*. Thomas Duncombe of Duncombe, which is a goodly estate close to the town, is still young, but hath long been a stirrer-up of strife and sedition. He is known to all the godly as a turbulent and ill-conditioned young man, and is affected to the king's cause almost beyond any of his neighbours. It is only the fear of losing his estate that hath so long kept him from joining the king's army."

"That is a lie, you foul rogue!" I cried, slipping forward and laying my hand with no little weight upon his shoulder.

His lank jaws dropped as if he had seen a ghost, and his papers fell from his hand, fluttering to the ground. I stooped down and picked them up. Then almost without thinking of what I did, for my blood was up, I tore them into a hundred pieces, and flung the fragments in his face.

"You canting rogue," I went on, "is it not enough to carry tales of your neighbours, but you must lie and slander them, too? I know not, sir, on what errand you have come to this place, but I know that no honest man can stand by to hear himself foully aspersed by a rogue who should be placed in the town stocks. If you have business with me I am here to answer for myself."

The captain had instinctively laid his hand for a moment on his sword hilt, and the mayor and his clerk, whom I now recognised, had got the table between us with much expedition. Twycroft was the first to recover from the effect of my sudden appearance, and stood up with a dangerous gleam in his ferret eye and a glow on his sallow cheek.

"*Exemplum famam sequitur*," he said, pointing at me with his finger. "This is the malignant of whom I have spoken; no chastening can touch him;

no stripes can turn him ; no shame can humble him. But truly the horn of the ungodly is no longer exalted. The day hath come—"

"This will suffice for the present," interrupted the captain with swift, military abruptness. "I will hear your relation at a more seasonable time ; your zeal will be duly reported. And now, sir, what has brought you here?"

"You can answer that question better than I am able," I answered carelessly. "Hitherto honest men have been able to walk as they will in this neighbourhood, but a switch is no match for a long blade like that, and I was forced to come whether I would or no."

"Your tongue runs glibly for an honest man, but we shall see whether your acts answer with your words. Sergeant Hopgood, where met you this gentleman?"

"Even on the road from Beauchamp Hall, close by the bridge ; whether he be of the party—"

"Of that not a word. Did he seek to escape from your hands?"

"Truly I saw him hesitate as though minded to fly, but he was taken in the toils before he could draw bridle. And this I will testify, that he showed great curiosity to see the inside of this matter, laying his snares with some skill till I bade him be silent and trouble me no more."

"This must be looked to speedily," answered the captain. "We must not rouse the birds before they are taken, every feather of them. Let the guard be strengthened at the bridge without delay, for they can go no other way, and let none through, backward or forward, man, maid or child. Now, sir," he continued, turning to me, who had hitherto no clue to his meaning, "I need not ask to what party you belong, but I must know on what errand you are here."

"Even the errand of an idle man, as I have said," I answered. "I had not hoped to see this fair company, whose entertainment—"

"This will not pass with me. I have that will

make you speak plain, and be assured a file of troopers at a dozen paces is not the matter of an idle jest. Look you, sir, your country wits have hardly shown you where you stand. You will answer me as you value your life. Are you come from Beauchamp Hall?"

My blood was up, and my antagonism so roused that I had like to have refused to answer, but one glance at his eyes and lips taught me prudence. In a moment I saw there was more in the air than I had knowledge of, though what it was I could not guess, and I determined to look carefully to my words.

"Duncombe lies a mile and a half from Beauchamp Hall," I answered, "and I have ridden straight from home. If you will return and sup with me, for we are a hospitable people—"

"You do not look like a fool," he answered shortly, "and I have warned you once. When were you at Beauchamp Hall last?"

"A fortnight since," I answered, "and if you would know the reason, Sir Austin's roan horse—"

"I want no reasons, and for your roan horse—pshaw, this is but the crackling of thorns. Know you who are there now?"

"Where?" I inquired, looking straight in his face with a gaze of innocent inquiry.

"At Beauchamp Hall, sirrah," he cried, fairly losing his temper.

"We country folk are not good at riddles," I answered, "nor, as I have said, was I prepared for so many questions. But this I can answer; when I was there latest there was Sir Austin, poor gentleman, and his daughter, and Anthony Wingfield, the steward, who is now grown blind and deaf withal, and—"

"That will do, Master Duncombe," said the captain with an angry wave of his hand, "that will do, and thank God on your knees to-night that you have not some others I know to deal with. You must not think the saints are fools any more than those who ruffle it in silks and velvet. Did I suppose you were

sent here as a spy upon our motions I had not troubled you with questions, and for your idle answers I trust you will get wit with years."

"That will he never," cried my old master, who had been listening with undisguised impatience; "that will he never. Ill wine like this never grows mellow."

"This is my business, sir," said the captain. "You have done ill," he continued, turning to me, "that you did not answer my plain questions like a plain man, and you will suffer for your folly when it has come to the push of pike and the thrust of sword."

"I fail to comprehend your meaning," I answered. "As I have said, I, a plain country gentleman, living hitherto in peace with all men, come riding hither as is my custom of an afternoon. Your troopers, for what offence I do not know, bring me here a prisoner, and you, by what warrant I cannot see, would know my private affairs."

"You keep to your text consumedly. For our warrant, it runs large and plain. By the same warrant we rolled up Rupert at Long Marston, and may yet—tut, a warrant in buff and bandoleer is good enough for a country squire. Here, Hopgood, see that a room is prepared for this gentleman. Let him have some supper and a light; place a stout fellow with a sure hand under his window to keep him company. We are not here for our own pleasure, sir, but on the business of the Parliament and the people of England. War is not a pastime in which plain country gentlemen like yourself can follow their custom of an afternoon."

He looked at me with the shadow of a smile playing about his lips, and then taking up his gloves from the table, swung out of the room, his long sword clanking behind him.

I felt that he had the advantage of me in our interview, and I read on Twycroft's visage that he had the same thought. I was minded, however, to show that I did not feel my defeat. Therefore I drew a chair to the table, and called out to

mine host, who at that moment was passing the door, to bring me a tankard of ale. But the sergeant was a man of very different mettle from his captain—mettle that I afterwards came to know well.

"A truce to this fooling," he cried, placing himself between me and the door, "or I will find you a gag that will stop your mumming. Captain Faithful's heart is still too soft for this work, but when the godly General Cromwell has wholly winnowed the wheat—"

"To the devil with your generals, you crop-eared knave," I cried, having in those days little command over my temper, and speaking on the spur of the moment as I felt. "And, look you, carry hence that grinning jackanapes, or I will be tempted to repeat the lesson I taught him when he was younger."

At this Master Twycroft moved to a greater distance, but I think Hopgood was pleased to see he had awakened my wrath. He went to the door and gave a brief order, in a tone so low that I could not catch the words, to two of the soldiers who were lounging in the porch. Then he returned, and coming close up to me, laid his hand on my shoulder.

"I had smitten you this day under the fifth rib had you moved an eyelid, for I knew you were of the company of the ungodly. Take heed, therefore, to your words, for my heart is still fain and my hand is still ready. Though I am but a poor door-keeper in the Lord's house, I will not stand by while the wicked revile with their tongues and speak blasphemously. We are here—even here in Beauchamp Town—to cast down the high places and bring the proud of heart to nought. Therefore, give heed to my words."

I never loved a long discourse, not even those of the good Dr. Ringwood, which were ever full of charity and sweetness—nor do I love them yet. And in the days of which I write I was headlong and impatient—ever more ready to act than to think, and intolerant of restraint. But little more had driven me into making a push for liberty, though I could see that it was likely to end in disaster. However, I had made

up my mind that the sergeant should not preach his sermon in my hearing, as he had evidently a mind to do ; and if I was to remain a prisoner, as seemed the case, it would be in my own company.

"Nay!" I cried, "but turn about is fair play. You would do all the preaching and fighting, while you know that I am in the way to do neither. Let me tell you I care nothing for your threats. But bring me to the room your captain spoke of, and you may whine to these curs till they cry 'enough'! I will have none of you."

I thought this foolish speech had been my last. The mayor and his satellites threw up their hands in well-simulated horror—the rogue owed me ten pounds for last year's wool—and had only the grace to keep silent because they were afraid to speak. But Ezekiel was neither to be bound nor holden. I can see him yet in his red coat and sergeant's sash, his steel head-piece and great boots, with his long tuck trailing after him, marching up and down the room in a very ecstasy of spiritual excitement. Only the fear of his superior restrained him from laying violent hands upon me. But nothing restrained the torrent of wild and picturesque language that he poured forth. His deep-set eyes blazed, and a white foam came upon his lips. His spare frame was shaken with the energy of his passion.

I cannot now set down the long speech he delivered to me sitting there switching my riding-boots, and much that he said was quite beyond my comprehension. But I have not forgotten his concluding words,—
"The man who is destined to do this marvellous work is now among us. The Lord hath said Ephraim is mine and Manasseh also is mine. Go to, the threshing floor will be swept and garnished. The cry of the saints hath gone up to heaven—their reign is coming. Even as the children of the plain were consumed, so will they who follow Charles Stuart, the man of sin. From Edgehill and Long Marston, from Newbury and Stratton, the blood of the righte-

ous calls for vengeance. And even here in this town of Beauchamp, with your eyes you will see this night the man who is reserved for this great work."

He suddenly paused, as though he had gone too far, but at the time I paid little heed to the meaning of his words. I was impatient and angry. I could see no way of escape. My vanity, of which in those days I had no little share, was touched; my pride was wounded; therefore I rose up and walked to the door.

"Bedlam has broken loose," I cried. "I will see your captain, who has glimmerings of reason, but here is none."

"You will move a step at your peril!" he cried angrily, presenting the point of his weapon at my breast, "and truly you will see one who hath a different spirit to-morrow. For the rest, be assured, you will be made fast enough. Now follow me, and gratify the desire of your heart to your undoing."

CHAPTER III.

IN PERIL.

I HAD known the White Hart from boyhood, and I very well knew of old the pleasant parlour into which I was led. It was a long low room, panelled with oak, and somewhat dimly lighted by one window that overlooked a trim garden with strait walks and sweet-smelling shrubs. This window, of which I shall have more to say in a little while, opened inward, and formed a deep bay, where I had been used to sit as a boy when my father called here for a cup of ale. The window was but a few yards from the ground and gave a very pleasant prospect. Beyond the garden hedge one could see the road winding through green fields to the river, the circling arm of silver water, and the swell of woodland rolling toward the distant hills. I ever loved to stand in this dim quiet room with its smell of fragrant herbs, looking out on that lovely scene.

In the window there were wont to lie three or four books, a folio of Shakespeare, Fox's "Book of Martyrs," the "Colloquies of Erasmus," printed at Amsterdam, and strayed here I know not how, with two or three chap-books that were loose and lewd enough. Above the fireplace were crossed a pair of swords of very antique pattern, dug up, as I have heard, from a neighbouring battle-field, but now very clean and bright.

When I was left alone, as I was very soon, I sat down in an oak chair by the window. The events of the last hour had come upon me so suddenly that I was still puzzled and perplexed. I could not see why

I had not been allowed to return peaceably homeward, or why the town should be so strictly guarded. There had been no troops in our neighbourhood, nor any stir of war. The country folk were not zealously affected either toward the King or the Parliament, but I could see that great events were stirring, and that I had unwittingly involved myself in the unseen movements. I did not doubt that a little while would clear up the mystery; but in the meantime I knew with what anxiety I should be awaited at home.

To pass the time I read in the books till it grew dark, which it did very soon, and then was quite at a loss to know what to do with myself. I could hear the measured pace of my guard on the walk under the window, and could see the top of his steel head-piece, as he strode past with his musket on his shoulder. For a while I counted his footsteps, but I soon grew weary of my calculations, and longed for better companionship than that monotonous tread, with its occasional pauses. I was growing hungry, too, for we dined early at Duncombe, when the key turned in the lock, and a flood of light streamed from without into the gloom of the chamber. Then my friend Ezekiel entered, followed by a soldier bearing a huge platter, on which was a tankard, a loaf of white bread, and some home-made cheese.

I got up out of my chair and stretched my arms.

"You have been long in coming," I said, "and I am sharp set."

He looked at me sourly under his brows.

"By my will, you had kept your papistical fast till the morning, but our captain would have it otherwise. Darkness and hunger are a good medicine."

"Not so good," I cried with levity, drawing up to the table, "as bread and honest ale. If your captain would join me, for I am of a companionable nature, I should strive to be content without luxuries."

"I trow my captain has other work in hand than

feasting with malignants ; but if I thought you would incline your ear to me for a season—”

“Nay, that I will not,” I answered rudely ; “I drink no vinegar.”

“You will drink a shrewder draught than that. Surely I was right.”

“Right or wrong, I will be left in peace. You have given me very ill words, and I may grow quarrelsome.”

I could see him marvelling at the prisoner who treated his captivity in this way, and I was on that account the more inclined to keep up the comedy. My only excuse is that I was young and full of high spirits ; and besides, his measured drawl and fluent speech were as gall and wormwood to me.

He fixed the candle in the sconce without a word. Then he went over and looked out of the window, standing with his back towards me for a good while. “John Causton is a bold rider,” he said, turning round, “and a pious man, from the godly parish of Slepe. Should you move your hand toward the window, he has orders to deal with you. He has lost his supper by your means, and he will not forget it should you give him occasion.”

“I would he were back in his parish,” I answered. “Here we clap sturdy vagrants in the stocks.”

He could find no answer in his rage.

“Nay, man,” I went on, changing my tone, “had this tankard been of a more generous size, I had asked you to join me in a health to all honest men.”

“I drink no healths. Truly, when the time comes, I will lift up my voice in witness against you.”

“And in the meantime I would finish my supper.”

I smiled inwardly at his discomfiture, as I sat long over my frugal meal. The time was like to pass slowly enough, and there was little need to hasten. Outside there was a continual coming and going ; the clanking of weapons on the stone passage without my door ;

hoarse orders shouted and answered ; the continual hum of conversation with no intermittent pauses. I sat listening, trying to catch some meaning in the confusion, but I was wholly unable. Then I brought the books to the table, and after a while wholly lost myself as I read. In this way I must have passed a good while, for I was brought to myself by the sudden spluttering of the candle that had now spent itself. In a minute or two, with a sudden flicker, it went out.

The night had grown very dark, it being now, as I should suppose, about nine o'clock, and going over to the window I saw that a small rain had begun to fall. All the windows of the inn were lighted up, and being myself wholly in the darkness, as he crossed the path of the lights, I could at times see John Causton, the pious man from Slepe, or some other who had taken his place, still keeping guard on the walk by the window. I watched him for a while, seating myself in the embrasure for the purpose, but got no comfort from the sight. Then he drew himself up under the shelter of the wall to escape the wind and rain, and here I left him.

I threw myself on the couch close by the window, at first very wakeful, but in time growing dull and heavy. Once I heard the fitful call of a bugle and the distant ring of hoofs, both passing, as it seemed, far-off. Then I think I must have slept, for it was with a sudden start that I found myself sitting erect upon the couch.

I sat there in the darkness and listened. It seemed that I had heard a sudden, swift outcry as if of alarm and dismay, but not loud, and almost instantly suppressed. A moment afterwards I heard the sound of voices under my window, a man's voice and a woman's. I could not catch the words, for they both spoke in low tones, the man's, I think, being lowest. Curiosity, merely, drew me to the window, curiosity and wonder whether the man from Slepe had made an assignation on his guard.

But my curiosity was very speedily changed into alarm and dismay, as you shall hear.

I leapt back to the fireplace, stumbling as I went, caught up one of the swords that were there fixed, and so armed stole back to the window. Searching cautiously in the darkness for the spring or catch, I drew the window inward an inch or two, and leaned forward, listening with my very heart in my mouth. I had no difficulty in hearing, for the two stood fair beneath me, though I could only make out the outlines in the excessive darkness. On either side of where they stood, but some good paces away, was a small stream of light lying along the path, that only served to make the gloom in which they stood the more dense. The man's back was still turned from me ; his hand was upon the woman's shoulder.

"Nay, wench," I heard the former say, "you go not hence so speedily. Either I know your business or I call my sergeant."

"You would not shame a poor maid before them all," came in reply a low voice that sent my heart beating mightily. "I but stole out to see—to see—pray, had you never a sweetheart yourself?"

"'Tis like enough, and may again. You did not think to find him here?"

"Nay, nor one who would treat me thus, when—I dare not show my face in the White Hart again were this made known. Pray let me slip within, and—and you may have a kiss for yourself in the morning."

"Nay, you steal not away so easily. An you be the tall maid I saw on the stair-head when I went to supper, I must have the kiss now, and its cousin in the morning. We soldiers are not paid with promises. Had John Causton been still, on guard you had not got off so lightly."

"You drive too hard a bargain. I pray you let me go. My father may be looking for me even now."

"Your father is drinking canary in the room beyond with the captain. Here am I two hours more with this cold rain for company. Therefore I would

warm my hands at your pretty cheeks. Nay, and you call out—”

He had caught hold of the girl, who was struggling to free herself from his embrace. But I who had been listening in wonder and indignation had in the instant made up my mind.

Opening the window to its full with a gentle movement and without the least noise, I fairly measured the distance, and flung myself with all my weight upon him. We fell to the ground together, and as we fell I sought for his throat with my hands. But he made not the least sound, and lay quite motionless under me. In his fall his head must have struck the ground heavily, for he did not show the least appearance of life.

The girl had started back, and would have called out, but I cried suddenly—

“On your life not a word, Mistress Melody. ’Tis I, Tom Duncombe.”

I think for the moment she was unable to answer, while I dragged the soldier close under the wall, and bound him with my kerchief. Then I rose up and caught her by the hand.

“I know not,” I cried, “what you do here, but I know ’tis no place for either of us. Whither would you go?”

“To Beauchamp. ’Tis a matter of life and death. There is still time, but there is not a moment to lose. For our lives we must get through.”

“Then we must not tarry here. If there is more to tell I can hear it as we go.”

I placed my hand within her arm, which presently ceased to tremble, and avoiding the light as we went, sought for the wicket gate that opened upon a narrow lane that led through divers fields to the river and so to the bridge. This we found with difficulty, but unhappily so securely fastened that it was not in any way to be opened. I was in no mood of mind to take this for a hindrance. Setting myself with all the force of my body against it, I presently rent it

from its hinges with no little noise, and we stepped out into the road. We went for a little way in silence ; then I stopped short.

"Now, Mistress Melody, I must know what this masquerading means."

Ever since I had recognised her voice as I listened at the window, a hundred thoughts had been chasing one another through my brain, but among them all one so dominant and overmastering that it survived all the others. I was mad enough to think that it was for my sake that my old playmate had thus ventured her safety. But I would now have it from her own lips, and I spoke, perhaps, as one who knew what the answer would be. This confession I make here the more willingly as it is the only thought with which I ever did her wrong. So I put my question, and waited for her answer.

"Other men are fighting for their king, Tom Duncombe, while you rust at home. There is now a troop at Beauchamp Hall with a store of treasure on its way to Oxford for the king. My brother Percival and Lord Gainsford are with them there. They are to be trapped here—taken, as I heard the Round-head captain say, like woodcock in a springe. The enemy has so drawn round them that they cannot pass, and they do not know their danger."

"But how came it that you—"

"My woman's wit helped me here, and now let your man's wit help us back."

"The man's wit that let you stray into this danger," I cried bitterly, Lord Gainsford's name having touched me, "was careful of its own skin. You do not know what you have done."

"I know we must save them if it cost our lives."

There was such strong insistence in her tones as I had never heard before ; my little playmate seemed suddenly to have put on the courage of a heroine. Her voice rang so true and clear, with so much desperate earnestness in it, that I had not the heart to chide.

"There is no time to tell you how I came hither. None knew my errand but myself. A woman may do something for the cause she loves! Has Thomas Duncombe turned a traitor, too?"

I did not answer, but stood a minute or two in quiet thought, having now taken in the situation and seeing no clear way out of it. Had I stood there alone unembarrassed by this charge that had been so lately placed in my hands, I had not hesitated a moment, but gone about the business with alacrity and even cheerfulness. But I saw the danger that menaced us; I dare not dream of drawing my companion into the peril I myself had willingly encountered. Like herself, I felt the news must be brought to Beauchamp at any cost, yet I could not leave her, and we could not go together. Our danger increased every moment. Even now the alarm at my escape might be raised. Every corner of the village would be searched, and we must inevitably be discovered. We had not a minute to lose. Yet we could only escape by the bridge, and that I knew was vigilantly guarded. Ten miles farther down the river we might, indeed, cross, but such a course was out of the question.

"Can you think of nothing?" she cried impatiently.

"There is little comfort in thinking," I answered. "Mistress Melody, for the first time in my life, I would that you were a hundred miles away. We cannot pass the bridge; we may not tarry here."

"Cannot? nay, we must," and her little foot beat the ground impatiently. "You were not wont to be a coward."

"But now I am the veriest coward in the world. Myself I would venture cheerfully; you I dare not."

"Think no more of me. 'Tis for the king—the king, that we do this. I would give my life for the cause I love."

"Not with my will," I answered gloomily.

There was a proud tone in her sweet voice that showed a constancy I knew I could not change nor alter. She was very resolute and fearless, perhaps not seeing the danger so clear as I did, but for myself I must confess I was for the moment quite unmanned.

"It were possible," I said, "to cross by the lower bridge at Brynford—"

"Too late, too late. The convoy starts at twelve, and part of Ireton's horse are waiting to take them on the road. I heard it all before I left the inn."

Suddenly, as I stood there biting my lips in the darkness, a daring plan flashed upon me, but a plan full of peril for myself and for the girl who had already ventured so much. The night was very dark, and the rain was falling like a thick mist. The wind had now wholly ceased. Where we stood we could hear the muffled swirl and gurgle of the river swollen with the autumnal rains. I knew I could place my life on Mistress Leigh's faithfulness and courage. The danger she must run was great; yet, haply, not greater than that she ran where we now stood. At least there was a chance for her; for myself, with the inconsiderateness of youth, I did not think at all. I have many times since wondered at my rashness, and the Providence that brought me to safety.

"Mistress Melody," I said, drawing my breath, for I had now made up my mind, "I think you can venture it."

"What?" she cried, with a sudden hopefulness.

"I shall draw the troopers from the bridge. Wait till that is clear, then make for the Hall for your life."

"But you?"

"Oh, I shall play a merry game of hide-and-seek, and wager that I reach the Priest's Walk before you leave the road. When you hear me call out, watch heedfully and take your chance."

"You do this for me?" she asked doubtfully.

"Nay, I do this for both of us, and the treasure at

the Hall. Why, you tremble! A moment since and you were courageous enough, Mistress Melody."

"I am not afraid for myself; I think I am only a weak girl, after all."

I tried to cheer her, making light of the danger, and praising her courage and constancy.

By this time we had reached the place where the lane joins the main road to the bridge, and here we dared not venture further in company, for I heard already the voices of the sentinels, though I could not see them in the darkness of the night. I caught hold of her hand, which was very cold, and pressed it to my lips. She did not now falter or waver in the least degree, and again repeating my caution, with one word of hasty farewell, I darted across the road, and so into the pasture that ran quite down to the bank of the river. I could see only the dark gloom of the bridge, but could not distinguish its outlines. I was not apprehensive that I should be discovered, though I now stood within a few paces of the guard, and could hear one of them humming a psalm-tune under his breath. His two comrades were busy wrangling over the body politic.

I was now beneath the bridge, and close by the turgid river, that swept by with a thousand voices.

Bending low, I ran some hundred paces down the bank, and then stood erect to listen. There was no sound but the dashing of the rain and the hollow echoes of the night. Then suddenly I cried out, "God save King Charles," and waited to listen for the response.

There was a sudden alarm and outcry on the bridge, as though the men on guard were debating and questioning with themselves. Then there was the sound of footsteps and a crashing, as of one forcing his way through a hedge. Again I repeated my cry, but this time more loudly, and began to run with all my speed down the bank. I ran some distance. My pursuers (for I could hear more than one) were already pressing closely upon me, when my foot caught on a

tussock, and I went rolling headlong to the earth. I could not stop or save myself, so great had been the speed with which I ran. Before I could recover my breath, nay, almost before I knew what had happened, the swift stream had caught me by the throat, and was whirling me in its black and broken waters.

The troopers had heard the splash, and had run forward to the place where I had disappeared. The black water was in my throat and eyes. For a minute I felt chilled and helpless, plunged, as it were, in unplumbed depths ; and then I struck out desperately. When I rose to the surface, there was a blackness before my eyes, and the roaring of the river in my ears. To gain the farther bank was now all my thought ; but, clad as I was, and the river so strong and fierce, this was no easy matter, had there been no other danger. Yet I kept my head above the stream, striking out the while bravely, and never once looking toward the bank I had left.

"'Tis but a drunken fool from the town," I heard one cry. "Let him drown in his cups. If the captain heard of this we were like to be horsed for our pains. We had best get back and think no more of it."

"There was no ale in that voice ; I trust we have not fallen into a fool's trap ; we should not have left the post. Canst see nothing?"

"Ay, water enough to float a navy, but for aught else—stay, what is that?"

I thought I had been discovered, but it proved a false alarm, and I kept on swimming, still, indeed, borne down the stream, but ever nearing the farther bank. The voices behind me grew faint, and then died away.

To tell my story shortly, I at length touched firm ground upon the other side, and with the help of the willows that grew there abundantly, lifted myself on to the bank but little the worse for my journey.

You can imagine that I did not stand long in debate. My mind was full of my old playmate. Again

and again I reproached myself that I had led her into danger, though, indeed, I knew not what else I could do. But I was still hopeful that she had not been discovered, for no sound of outcry came through the quiet night, and then I knew that her quick thought and resolute courage would not fail, and that the alarm I had raised had made her task possible and almost easy in the darkness. So that it was with good hope that I set off running through the fields toward Beauchamp Chase. I could have found my road almost blindfold, so familiar was I with the way.

Opening upon the high road nearest to the town was a little iron gate that led into the park by a seldom-used path. This path (called the Priest's Walk, though why I do not know) led in many windings, tortuous and dreary, upon the drive hard by the Hall, and was so densely shut in by a growth of foliage that two could barely walk abreast upon it. It was for this gate that I made at the top of my speed, hoping that I should gain it before Mistress Melody's arrival, for my way across the fields was far shorter than that by the high road.

In this I was not mistaken. Fear and hope lent wings to my feet, and I think little more than a quarter of an hour had passed from the time I had left her at the bridge until I found myself upon the road close by the gate. It lay open, hidden as it was in the dark wall and screened by the overhanging boughs. I stood for a minute or two to recover my wind, and then took the road towards the town, stopping every few paces to listen. I had not gone very far when I heard the sound of swift, flying footsteps coming toward me; then I knew we had succeeded almost beyond our hopes. That I might not startle her as she came I waited until the footsteps drew quite near, and then I called out as I had called before, "God save the King."

The sound of the running suddenly stopped. Then a dear voice called out my name in the darkness,

and I advanced towards it with outstretched hands. I was so overcome by my joy at her escape that I could have taken her in my arms, but perhaps seeing my design, she stepped back soberly.

"Thank God!" I cried, "you are safe!"

"It was not I who ran the risk," she cried. "I returned more easily than I went. But you—"

"I am safe and sound. Now tell me how it happened."

"To our best wishes. When you left me I crept so near that I thought they could hear the beating of my heart. Then I waited, wondering what you meant to do. Suddenly, when you called out, they ran to the bridge side, and one of them, getting through the fence, fell, so that his comrades had to pull him out again. I could have laughed had it been a fitting time, but I was too busy slipping past in the confusion, and had got to the other side before you called the second time. It was well done; you have my best thanks for ever."

"A thousand men could have done my work; not one woman yours."

"This is not the time for gallant speeches, Tom; there is still something to do for the king."

"'Tis always the king," I cried moodily. "I did not do this for the king, but for you."

"The king and still the king," she answered with great spirit. "Though his people fail him, and his loyal gentlemen fall away and grow lukewarm, my loyalty will never falter. Have you, too, grown cold?"

"You called me hard names to-night, Mistress Melody. Traitor I never was, coward I hope I never shall be. You know that I would serve his majesty as I would serve yourself."

"Hard names break no bones. You were still a wayward fellow, Tom."

"Wayward if you will, but I think faithful too."

"And wise and prudent, Sir Austin says, though I think your acts to-night will spoil your reputation."

"I have not pleased you, at any rate," I said, still

thinking of my Lord Gainsford. "You grow difficult to please."

"Is this a time to play at forfeits or read the Sphinx's riddles?" she said with sudden earnestness. "We are saving thirty lives, and treasure that will keep three regiments a month at least. Do you think I wellnigh forgot my maidenhood and adventured my good name as I did to-night for my own pleasure? I dare not think of what I have done. Is it a little thing to see me here?"

From her voice I could see that she had nearly given way to her pent-up feelings, and I reproached myself for my selfish thoughts, and begged her pardon for them a thousand times.

All this while we were making our way along the Priest's Path, I going a step or two in front that I might protect her from the overhanging boughs. The way was black as ink; the branches that struck my face were heavy with the rain, and our feet were deep in the fallen leaves. Once and again she had fallen had I not caught her in my arms, but she still pressed forward with unabated spirit, and would not own that she was weary. As we went I learned how she had come to venture on her dangerous errand to the town, nor could I but wonder at the courage and loyalty that had driven one so modest and maidenly into such heroic paths.

Her brother and his troop had arrived in the afternoon, worn with splashing through impassable by-roads, and having ridden forty miles without having drawn a bridle. She herself had gone down to the lodge and there had learned a vague story about the redcoats in the town. She had suddenly made up her mind to learn the truth, and had taken refuge in the White Hart, where from an upper window she had seen my coming. Here she had learned what I had failed to learn, and had made up her mind to carry back the news at any risk. All this she told me very simply, making light of the danger she had run, and entreating me to keep her secret.

The path seemed to us in our impatience to have no end, but after a long time we came out upon the terrace, glad to have escaped from this dreary labyrinth, and rejoiced to see we were yet in time.

CHAPTER IV.

HEY FOR CAVALIERS!

WE stood quite still for a minute looking at the scene before us. The lower windows of the great house were all aglow with light; the sound of laughter and shouting and the singing of rude catches, very loyal and coarse, filled the night with clamour. Thirty horses or more, all fully equipped and harnessed, were standing on the terrace or were being led from the stables. The flashing of the lights; the clank of arms; the neighing of horses; the swift movement and sounds of bustling life stood out in strange contrast to the unbroken silence and darkness we had quitted.

I say we stood still, looking at the scene for a minute, and then Melody slipped from my side without a word, and I lost sight of her in the shadow of the house. For myself, when I entered the great hall, which I did presently, I found half-a-dozen gentlemen fully dressed and armed, about to take their leave. Sir Austin Leigh was standing by the fireplace, leaning upon his staff, a tall old gentleman with a scholar's stoop, but now showing upon his face a look of animation and eagerness that I had never seen it wear before. His hand was upon his son's shoulder, showing very white—for I noticed this—on the dark ground, with a great ring sparkling on his third finger. Near by stood my Lord Gainsford, a very fine person, whom I had met before, and a little away one who arrested my notice the moment my eyes fell carelessly upon him.

This was a tall gentleman, for such he seemed to be, though his dress was frayed and soiled, and

his weapons of poor condition. He was no longer young—being about fifty—but his eyes were very bright and bold, and his carriage, when I first saw him, very resolute and full of a fine swagger. He had a black patch on one cheek and wore his hair quite short. There was such fierce restlessness in his eyes, and such reckless audacity about his mouth, and yet such easy grace in the pose and movements of his person, that unwittingly my eyes rested upon him more than once. He was standing with his back toward the rest, but it struck me, and I know not why it should, that he was listening attentively.

He was the first that noticed my entrance. He stepped forward a pace, and then called out, "Faith, gentlemen, the masque is but beginning. 'Tis Neptune's self comes dripping from the sea."

There was a loudness in the voice that grated upon me as I stood there, though his manner was pleasant and his eyes laughed.

For a minute they all stood astonished, and then together they caught up the laughter of him who had first spoken. And, indeed, I must have presented a curious and ludicrous figure standing in the midst of them, with the light streaming full upon me. My hair fell wet and tangled about my shoulders; the water still dripped from my doublet that was torn and stained a hundred hues; and my grey worsted stockings dropped over my shoes. I stood bare-headed, for my hat and bands were both gone, but I knew that I should soon turn their laughter into deadly earnest. Sir Austin alone was grave and did not smile, for he had grown to know me in these later days, and for a bookish man had a keen, quick eye.

"'Tis Tom of the Steeple!" cried Percival Leigh, coming forward and wringing my hands; "Tom of the Steeple, and not yet quit of his mad pranks. Hast been in the Axe, man?"

"Ay, to the bottom," I answered gravely. "But I am glad to have come out in time."

"To say farewell, and drink a stirrup cup with us

before we part—unless, indeed, you go with us. Wilt ride for the king at last?”

“I had like to have drowned for him,” I answered, “and for aught I know may yet be shot or hanged for him.”

I do not disguise that in those days I was hot-tempered and easily stirred, and now I spoke with some heat, for I saw they still laughed. I think they had all been drinking, but this only made me the more moved.

Then my Lord Gainsford, who was always a courteous gentleman, though in those days we did not love one another, stepped forward gravely and laid his hand on Leigh’s shoulder.

“Mr. Duncombe has tidings of importance; I see it in his eyes.”

“Your sight is wonderful, my lord,” cried the tall gentleman of whom I have spoken; “for my part, I see nothing but the water of the Axe, unless he has been drinking. Shall we have another bottle before we start?”

“You forget yourself, Colonel Death,” my lord answered with coldness; “this is not a tavern, nor the camp, and this gentleman—”

“Can answer for himself, my lord, when occasion serves. In the meantime there are two things I have at heart—the king’s cause, and the safety of this house. To do what you propose may be dangerous to the first; to remain here will bring ruin on the last.”

I spoke very slowly, for I was angry at their levity at such a crisis. But now they were all sober enough, and for a minute there was a silence in the room. Outside, just under the windows, one of the troopers was trolling a rude catch, and the words came very clear and distinct in the pause. I still remember them—

“Here’s a health to King Charles! confusion
To all crop-headed cuckolds, I sing;

Here's a health to King Charles, God bless him
We will drink to or die for the king."

"My neighbour would not speak thus without good cause," said Sir Austin. "I pray you, Tom, speak plainly."

"There is no time for aught else but plain speech," I answered. "You gentlemen think you travel secretly. If there be a traitor at work I know not, but this I do know—your plans, your numbers, nay, your names are known, and all that you have done from the time you first set out. Your next journey is to be your last, for General Cromwell, who is no bungler, will be there in person to see that they do not fail."

"A fico for your news! Cromwell is at Launceston," cried Colonel Death, interrupting me with a tall oath. "He would catch other fish than a small sprat like this."

"You may know more of Cromwell than I, sir," I answered coldly, "but so I gathered from the Roundhead sergeant now in Beauchamp Town. There is a pretty troop of horse there at any rate."

"You are jesting, Mr. Duncombe," said Lord Gainsford earnestly. "We had heard the country here was quite clear."

"That is no longer so, my lord. There is a troop in the town that will give a good account of itself; there are others waiting for you on the road, though where I know not, and they say you cannot break through. This news is certain. By this time they know that you have learned about the ambush, for I was a prisoner and only escaped with difficulty, and in such plight as you see me."

They looked at one another blankly as if the news had come upon them like a thunderclap; only Colonel Death whistled softly, and with his arms akimbo and his legs wide apart, stood looking at the picture of Sir Ralph above the fireplace. For a minute no one spoke, and then Sir Austin, man of

books as he was, was the first to recover himself, and spoke with a fine, high manner.

"This has now become my business. All that I have belongs to the king, my children, my house, my fortune and my life. Though I have been still a lover of peace, I would willingly venture them all in his service—all and more than all. 'Tis now certain that you cannot set out without the loss of what is become more needful to his majesty's cause than men or arms. It will never be said that a Leigh of Beauchamp refused to give all for his king. Here is a strong house, provisioned and garrisoned, that can hold out a fortnight. I am an old man who can do little, but my son will take my place, and my servants, stout fellows all of them, will stand by me to the last."

"My father is right," cried Percival with a fine glow on his face, "and I go with him. If we cannot ride through, then we can stand here. There is a store of snaphaunces and two demi-culverins in the tower, with enough gunpowder to serve our turn. Without ordnance the enemy cannot breach the walls, and by the time it is brought hither the bold riders from Oxford will have raised the siege. There is no gentleman here who had not rather return without his two hands, than without the treasure that was committed to our swords to keep. And I say this the rather because you came hither to pleasure me and something out of the straight way of our journey."

"If a fault has been committed," said Gainsford, I thought rather coldly, "the fault is mine. I had hoped our sudden change of direction would throw the enemy off the scent, and how they have learned our movements I do not know. But this I know, that to stand a siege here will bring ruin on this house, as Mr. Duncombe has said, and endanger the safety of a gallant gentleman and his daughter. We cannot do it."

"I am with you, my lord," cried Colonel Death, rapping out a great oath. "In God's name let us not

mew ourselves here. We fly-by-nights are safer in the saddle, and with fresh horses and thirty good swords, need not fear all the yard-sticks in Chepe. Boot and saddle, say I, and another draught of Sir Austin's most excellent canary."

"It is possible," my lord went on, wholly disregarding the interruption, "that we may not succeed ; but our lives will answer for our failure, and there is no gentleman in England will venture that more willingly than myself. I do not doubt the news Mr. Duncombe has brought us ; it is too certain. But with courage and caution we may yet baffle them."

But Sir Austin was not to be moved. I never admired this courtly gentleman more than at this moment, when he seemed to be inviting the ruin of himself and the destruction of his house. He was no longer the studious recluse, but the man of action, easy, confident, and masterful. His bearing was quite other than I ever remember it ; the tone of his voice was different ; his eyes were alight with purpose and determination. While the others were strongly moved by the news I had brought, he, to whom it imported so much, stood calm and perfectly collected. He was to be swayed neither to the left hand nor the right, but took in the whole situation with clear, unwavering eyes. In almost the very words his daughter had used—and this struck me at the time—he spoke with great simplicity and firmness.

"The king, my Lord Gainsford, always the king. No private interests, no personal desires must stand in the way of the cause we love. Faith and loyalty are more than life and lands, and I were indeed bankrupt of honour did I not willingly venture them now. This poor house and all that it holds are wholly at his service, and I know no greater honour, no honour half so great, than to employ them in his need. If the man Cromwell be indeed upon the road, you cannot escape him ; he never sleeps. Think not of my daughter or myself, but help me to put the house in

train, and let us look to the supplies. Believe me, here only is safety."

I took no part in the debate that followed, long and acrimonious as it was, having no skill in these matters, but having, above all things, the interests of my dear mistress at heart. I could easily see that danger and suffering were likely to follow the course Sir Austin had proposed, and had I been consulted in this council of war, I had given my voice for a speedy setting forth. But Sir Austin's arguments, or rather his ardour, at length prevailed; only Colonel Death standing firm against them, and not to be moved.

"God's grace, gentlemen!" cried the latter, twirling his moustache upwards very fiercely, "you may take what course you will, but I stand fast. To a cavalier of fortune like myself, it matters not; onfall and ambuscado, march and sally, fair weather and fine, come in the day's work. They will take us here like rats in a barn, and this good gentleman, for whose pious zeal I express all admiration, will see his noble house come tumbling about his ears. A free rein and the sword's point, say I. You can send no messenger for help. Not a trooper knows the road, or would adventure his empty pate in the service if he did. Pooh! How long can you make a stand here?"

Then a sudden thought struck me, to which I gave expression almost in the moment it was born.

I had been standing a little apart from the rest, striving to catch some heat from the fire that burned in the great hearth, for I was chilled to the bone, and my wet clothes were smoking like a kiln. But now a hundred thoughts were busy in my brain—a hundred thoughts and emotions. I was about to enter on a career full of adventure, and pregnant with danger; the wild clamour of war was about to fill the quiet places of my youth, and misfortune was hanging over the heads of those I best loved.

"There is none," I cried, stepping forward and placing my hands on the back of the chair from which Sir Austin had risen, "who knows the roads—

highway and byway—between this and Oxford as I do. Give me a stout horse, a dry suit, and a serviceable weapon, and I undertake that his majesty shall know how matters stand here. If I cannot fight, at least I can ride. You can find no other messenger, and there is none so fit as I."

Lord Gainsford looked at me, and then, with a momentary hesitation, frankly held out his hand.

"I have, Mr. Duncombe, long since heard that you were a man of parts and courage; I should be proud to number you among my friends. I doubt not you will fulfil your offer like a gallant gentleman, and Nigel Oliphant will not forget what you have done. This is an expedition full of peril, but if any can come safely through, I think that you can do it."

"A hundred pieces to a tester that he does," cried Percival Leigh, laying his hand upon my shoulder. "I would that I might ride with you, as we did of old; but I am wanted here. See that the grass does not grow under their feet in Oxford, and, in the meantime, we shall try to keep the brewer's vats arunning. Take the sorrel mare; she is fit to run for a man's life, and do not spare the spur."

This informal council of war broke up shortly, and in a little while orders were being shouted, men were running hither and thither, arms were being brought from secret hiding-places, and with all the spirit and expedition that was possible, the old house where I had spent so many hours was being put in a condition of defence. Only when the rest had left us, Sir Austin took me by the hand, and with a look in his eyes that at that time I scarce could read, turned to me and said:

"A quick eye, a brave heart, a cool head, and a ready hand, are a noble fortune in themselves. An old man's happiness depends on your courage and devotion. I can trust your father's son."

I knew what he would have said, and I had no words with which to answer him. I say I knew what he would have said; the one supreme and

dominant thought in his mind at this time was his daughter's welfare and safety—this thought that he had stifled at the command of duty and the trumpet-call of loyalty. And now that the supreme sacrifice was made—made at such cost—he had again allowed himself to dwell upon it, and for the moment it had filled him with dismay. I could only press the thin hand that trembled in mine, feeling even at that moment that there was a courage greater than the rude bravery of the battle-field, and a heroism sublimer than his who wields the sword.

But I had little time left for thought; I had still to prepare myself for my journey, which I knew was long and perilous, and it was already somewhat after eleven. There was not a moment to lose. I could easily foresee that every moment of delay would only make my task more difficult and arduous. Therefore I went about my simple preparations with despatch, and soon had changed my dripping garments for a courtly suit, the first that came to my hand, had provided myself with a weapon, and had received such instructions as were necessary. Then standing in the banqueting chamber, with torches flaring round us, buff-coated troopers coming and going, and arms being piled by the windows—standing there, the rest with their swords drawn, we drank one cup to my safe journey and the king's cause. The faces of my friends were aglow with enthusiasm; their eyes shone with the fire of devotion and loyalty, and my own heart caught the flame of that splendid fervour.

The last words that rang in my ears as I quitted the chamber were, "The king, the king," words that many a gallant gentleman has died with on his lips; but fail now to touch the heart and stir the blood as they did in the days of which I write.

Then I went out into the comparative darkness of the great hall. As I passed the foot of the staircase a piece of crimson ribbon suddenly fluttered past me and fell at my feet. I thought no one saw it but

myself, nor caught sight of the white arm over the balustrade, and the soft shimmer of golden curls that disappeared almost immediately. The thing happened in a moment. I caught up the token and thrust it into my breast. There it still lies, and has lain through all these years. There are dark stains upon it now, but as my old eyes rest upon it, sweet memories fill my heart, and I am again young, with all a young man's rapture and a young man's strength.

CHAPTER V.

BOOT AND SADDLE.

I GAVE the sorrel mare her head and plunged into the darkness that stood like a wall before me. The wind was now loud in the trees, and the falling rain struck my face in blinding sheets. A wilder and darker night I had seldom seen. But so full was I of my thoughts and of the import and consequences of my journey, that I took no heed of the weather. And running through every thought, running like a golden warp through the darker weft, was the sweet sense of the token that lay in my bosom. For never since I had known her had my mistress, as she then was and still is, shown me by word or action that her heart responded to my passion, or that she favoured me beyond the dozen others who paid her suit. We had grown up together, indeed, from childhood, in a sweet, familiar companionship, until she had become the central figure of my day-dreams, and the object of all my hopes. But she had ever smiled at my devotion, and turned my gallant speeches aside with a capricious coquetry that was all her own. More lately she had treated me with some coldness and apparent disdain, refusing to see that duty which bound me to Duncombe beyond the king's cause, and affecting to look down upon me for what she was pleased to call my selfish cowardice. And now upon the threshold of dangerous fortune she had stooped down from her high reserve, and in her simple gift I saw a message of encouragement and love. For her sake I had undertaken this journey; for her sake mainly, yet not altogether, for my heart was wholly with the

king, and there was no sacrifice that I would not willingly have made to serve him.

I gave the sorrel mare her head: I could hardly see ten paces before me, but the road was broad and hard, and the little mare was sure of foot. The lights of the great house were swallowed up in the darkness. I drew my cloak tightly round me and bent down my head to the storm. It wanted still half an hour of midnight. In my frequent journeys from Oxford I had learnt to know the roads by heart, and had little fear that I should lose my way. A few minutes more would bring me to the lodge, and then I should strike the main road to Banbury.

Every moment I thought to see the light in the window, when suddenly, in a pause of the wind as it ceased to gather its forces for a wilder rush, I caught the sound of a horse's hoofs on the gravelled path behind me, the sound of a horse at full gallop. I had hardly time to slacken my own speed and draw my sword, than the dark form of a horse and rider sprang out of the night, and in a moment halted alongside me. I wheeled round, and bending over my horse's neck, presented the point of my rapier. I could not distinguish the rider's face—nothing more than the outline of his person.

I sat there for a minute till he should make the first move, and holding myself ready to act on the defensive.

"In God's name is this tragedy or comedy?" cried the high, strident voice that I now remembered very well. "I have risked my neck to catch you, and now you treat me to the point of your toledo."

I lowered my weapon.

"What brings you here, Colonel Death?" I cried, filled with amazement at this sudden and unexpected meeting.

"A foundered jade, but the best that I could find. Put up your weapon and let us ride together."

"Nay, I must know what this means," I said. "But now I left you—"

"Tut, man, I know what you would say. You thought I had made up my mind to a week's fast and twelve months' confinement. I am a free rider, a minion of the moon, one of Diana's foresters, and willingly follow no man's pleasure but my own. I like the old gentleman's cellar rarely, but I am too old myself for remainder biscuits and salted pork, and would not be cooped up when I can find a horse and a tall companion like yourself to take the road with. I have made up my mind to ride with you to Oxford, and I pray that Oliver—if Oliver it be—have not laid them by the heels before we reach the end of our journey."

I know not how it happened, but there was something in this speech that filled me with anger and contempt. I had no suspicion of the loyalty of my new acquaintance, but his tone of selfish levity and his entire carelessness for the safety of his friends, jarred upon my feelings. I confess also that my vanity had preferred to do my dangerous errand without aid, and it may be that I was unwilling to share the honour of a successful issue with another. I answered, therefore, with some show of feeling :

"Colonel Death, I am plain spoken, and will say what I think, that we may not misunderstand one another hereafter. I had held you in more respect had you stood by your friends and mine, and had helped them with your skill and weapon, even though Warwick Gaol had been the end of it. But you have not seen right to do that, and I must now take you as I find you. We will ride together if you will, with this preface writ plain and large, that nothing will stay or hinder me—your peril or your life—from placing my missive in the king's hand. That beyond and above all things."

He laughed loudly, and was about to speak.

"You say your horse is spent," I went on, not minding the interruption, "while mine is fresh and full of spirit. If you cannot ride with me, I shall not stay for you. Should these terms please you, we can

travel together; if not, I shall take my own way alone."

Again he laughed loudly and threw up his hand, which seemed to be a trick he had.

"You are a *bon camarado* of the right sort. If King Charles could find ten regiments of your kidney, he might sleep in Whitehall yet. I will ride with you on your own terms, and thank God for my good company. I have ridden with all sorts in my life, but when it came to the push of sword he was not always best that spoke fairest."

I could not see his face, but I thought he laughed at me; at least there was a tone of raillery in his voice that was quite foreign to his words. But I had been honest with him, and if he chose to ride with me on the terms I had laid down, I knew that I at least should keep my part of the bargain.

For some time we rode side by side without speaking a word, for the wind met us full in the face, and sounded in the trees like the swell and stir of a great chorus of many voices. We could not hear the sound of our horses' hoofs upon the road in the mighty storm of wind. After a while we passed the lodge, and were soon out upon the high road, which here dipped into the valley, and gave us more shelter. My companion pulled up short for a moment, but I only turned my head and never slackened my speed. With an impatient oath he again joined me, and broke into a loud roar of laughter.

"The riding of my lord is like the riding of Jehu, the son of Nimshi, for he rideth furiously. I had as well been tied to the tail of a comet, or been yoked to a wild barbary. You are a bold rider, Mr. Duncombe."

"I am not riding for my own pleasure, sir, nor yours," I answered shortly, for as yet I confess I did not at all understand my companion, and I had no mind to let him cause me any delay. "Our friends will not thank us for loitering, and the king—"

"The king," he answered, "cannot mend broken heads, nor make an old fool young again. 'Tis well I

came into the world laughing, or your soberness would have been the death of me. Take my word for it, fair and softly ride many a mile. We hardly showed fleeter heels from Edgehill."

"I might not have ridden so fast then in your company," I answered.

"Pooh! as for that I had as good company, most valiant sir. I am not one who posts into credit with the jingling of a spur, and Goring, liar as he is, will bear me out that Jack Death did his duty. But I ever loved to go to the devil in my own way."

"I am not travelling by that road," I answered shortly.

"In Italy," he laughed, "they say all roads lead to Rome. Here am I whose bank is Paul's and whose warehouse is Pict Hatch, and yet I started on my journey as bravely as yourself. I rattled my broad acres through the dice box, and paid blithely for the ringing of the midnight chimes. I do not grudge the tavern shot, though but a cavalier of fortune, and riding here with a dare-devil like yourself."

"By your own desire, I would have you still remember."

"I am not like to forget that, though I would be your friend if you would let me. I am out at elbows if you please; I suffer execution for three shillings, and enter into five groat bonds—oh, happy Ben!—but gadzooks, I am a gentleman, and go threadbare with a merry heart. You are angry with me that I did not stay behind with Don Punctilio in the old house. Look you, I owe him no service, and fight for my own hand, I a captain without following, and a knight without a rood of land. I prayed him to take my way; I would not follow his. Therefore we are quits. So let us make our peace and ride as friends."

"I hope we are nothing less," I answered, "though—"

"Though you had rather I was elsewhere."

"That is true."

"I used to speak the truth myself—when it served

my purpose—and I can still speak by the card. There is that in Oxford that I put before the king's service, or my own worthless neck—a little girl who calls me father, and thinks me still a gentleman."

There was a softening of his voice, a touch of real feeling, that told me he spoke the truth. His boisterous laughter, his loud and strident voice, his frequent oaths, savoured too much of Alsatia, but here quite another and different man had spoken. The vizard, as it were, had dropped for a moment; I thought I caught a glimpse of a kindly human heart. I spoke with somewhat altered feelings.

"I shall be glad to have your company, but your horse is not so fresh as mine, and it must come to parting."

"*Che sara sara.* Never look to the end of your journey. My little maid is waiting for my company, and I shall not tarry on the road. There, you know my secret, and perhaps I caught a glimpse of yours on the staircase, very sweet and tender."

"You presume too far, sir," I said with sudden heat.

"An old fault of mine, my friends tell me, but let it pass. He that loves a rosy cheek—egad, I have loved them myself and still admire them at a safe distance."

"If we are to travel together," I said, "you must break your jests on some other subject than myself. Such jesting is apt to breed ill words."

"Spoken like Sir Oracle," he went on in the same mocking tone. "In good truth I have very ill manners, for you see I have kept very ill company. Do you hold with Geneva, Mr. Duncombe?"

I knew he laughed, but I kept my temper and thought it best to follow his strange humour."

"I am no theologian," I answered.

"Nay, but I think I am serious now. Why, look you, I was born a gentleman, with Thirlmere Hall for a heritage, in the pleasant county of Kent, and now at fifty I have but my sword and the suit upon my back.

I have played at bowls with fortune and taken all the rubs. Service in Poland, service with the Prince Cardinal, ventures to the Barbadoes and Virginias, service with the devil, and all the while I would be Don Amadis or Sir Bevis of Southampton. Tell me why I loved wine and women and the rattle of the dice-box when I should have been a bishop?"

"Tis too deep a question for a moment's answer."

"Nay, you laugh, and I can join you there. I have been laughing all my life."

"Stay," I cried, drawing up short and catching at the bridle of my companion.

The storm had somewhat abated and the rain had ceased to fall. We both stood quite still and bent forward on our horses' necks listening. Suddenly my companion broke from me and burst into a loud chorus—

" Boot and saddle, we ride by night,
Under the light of the silver moon—"

He got no further, for in a moment I had whipped out my rapier and presented it at his breast.

"Another word," I said, "and you are a dead man. Listen!"

There was no mistaking the sound. Even my untrained ear could tell that it was that of a troop of horse advancing on the road at a brisk trot. My companion seemed to hesitate for a moment, but I had instantly made up my mind.

A hundred paces back we had passed a belt of trees, and I knew that we would find shelter there. I was fully determined that the recklessness and audacity of my fellow-traveller should not imperil my safety, and still holding his bridle, I called to him sternly to turn. For a moment he did not seem inclined to give way to my urgency, but after hanging in the wind for a while, he turned his horse's head and followed me.

The silver brilliance of the moon shone once and again through the torn and flying clouds. Turning

in my saddle, I looked down the road, but could distinguish nothing in the broken and fantastic moonlight. In a minute or two we reached the belt of underwood, which lay dark under a thick roof of fir-trees, and plunged into the dense and matted growth. We found a little clear space here.

Then the cold splendour of the moon lighted up the road and fell upon my companion's face. I saw there was a smile upon it—a smile that stood on the threshold of laughter, and I saw that he had drawn his sword. Having now some knowledge of his reckless audacity, I knew not what wild trick he might play. I therefore came very close to him and laid my hand on his shoulder. He turned and looked at me.

"If you speak or move," I said quietly, "I will run you through. No man's life will stand between me and Oxford."

He would have spoken, but I motioned to him to be silent; for once again we heard the iron ringing of hoofs and a hoarse call of command that found an echo in the dark avenue of wood. The troop was now close upon us, and in a little while we saw it pass, the troopers sitting erect upon their horses and very silent. I did not count them, but I think they numbered a hundred swords.

Then the darkness gathered them up, and the sound of the trampling and the clank of steel died quite away. Having waited some little time, I pushed into the road again, and here my companion joined me, graver as I thought, and altogether silent.

"I trust the way is now clear," I said, "but we must travel heedfully."

"The time may come, Mr Duncombe," said Death slowly, "when this night may give you cause for wonder. I thought you but a simple country gentleman with little skill or wit, but I tell you soberly there are few men who had borne this off as you have done. Jack Death knows when he has met his match. Pshaw! you think I am a fool, a ranting, swearing, drinking crazy-wit, and God help me! I

am no other, but I think I know when I meet a man. And yet I would wager a guinea, if my starved purse ran so far, that you don't know a trick of fence..”

“I know enough to serve my turn,” I answered, having no clear meaning of this strange speech, “but I do not know why you loitered on the road. We had been discovered in another minute.”

“I was never nimble in retreat,” he answered with an uneasy laugh.

“If you ride with me,” I cried, “you will be more nimble to do my will, or we part company.”

“Then let us part friends,” he answered suddenly, “and part now, for we cannot travel together and keep the peace. My ways are not your ways, for which you may thank Heaven, and my horse has already shot his bolt; there is barely another mile in him.”

“You chose my company, sir, and yet I would not willingly leave you here.”

“Odds, man, I am not a baby to be taken by the hand and fed on pap. I can find my own way and guard my own head. You do not know me yet, and you do not know how nearly—”

He checked himself here and brought his horse to a stand. There was a strange meaning in his voice that I did not understand, a meaning quite at variance with his reckless words, but I confess my desire to reach Oxford was so great that I was more than pleased to quit his company.

“If such be your desire,” I said, “I will take my own way. There is an inn some six miles farther on where you may find shelter for the night.”

“One thing you will do for me, Mr. Duncombe. I do not doubt you will reach Oxford safely; men like you do not break down upon the road. My little girl is waiting—will you carry a message for me?”

I readily consented.

“You must remember that in her eyes I am still a gentleman; in her eyes the best and bravest in the

world. You will tell her that I am well and on the road—*Bayard sans peur et sans reproche*."

He laughed with a forced gaiety, and as was his manner, threw up his hand. Then he gave me certain directions, and so bade me farewell with a grip that made my fingers tingle.

As I rode away I could hear him singing a merry stave, the words that he sang ringing in my ears and keeping me company as I went:

" The lime is wet, and the snare is set,
But the little brown bird is merry, oh ! "

I was glad to be alone, having, after the manner of youth, entire confidence in myself, and I had now had enough of the society of my late companion, which was not without its serious disadvantages. I had come to think his merriment was altogether assumed, and I had already found his laughter more depressing than other men's despondency. I put down his strange behaviour on the road to a reckless carelessness of his own life, and I was altogether glad that our fortunes were not bound up together. Such and so short-sighted is the careless providence of youth.

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

As I have said, the rain had now ceased to fall, and the moon shone out at times in a clear space of sky. It was after midnight and very cold. The mire lay deep on the road, but the little mare went with a fine spirit, and I had now time to dwell upon the events of this stirring and eventful night. So much had happened, incident following upon the heels of incident with such startling rapidity, that I had not yet had time to think, but now I was able to gather up the threads and weave the broken tale.

Almost against my will I had become an actor in the great drama that I had watched so long, but it was not upon my own fate or fortune that my mind chiefly dwelt. That upon my courage and resource the happiness of my dear mistress depended was the central thought in my mind, from which all the others took their shape and colour. Her voice was still in my ear, her touch was still on my hand, and the little knot of ribbon in my breast spoke to me with eloquent insistence. Sometimes looking back on it now, I can see myself on the threshold of my fate, with loyalty for a companion and love for a guide, and I long for the stirring times of youth again. But these are vain thoughts, and I put them aside with all gentleness.

I was plunged in a profound reverie, the creature of a hundred swaying emotions, when I suddenly awakened with Colonel Death's song upon my lips:—

"The lime is wet, and the snare is set,
But the little brown bird is merry, oh ! "

And here I noticed for the first time with a great shock of surprise, that my mare was going lame. I could hardly realise this misfortune for a minute, it was so disastrous and unexpected. Then I pulled up and dismounted. On a hasty examination, I found that she had cast a shoe. I dropped her foot with a bitter malediction, and stood looking blankly before me. This was an accident that I had never anticipated nor foreseen.

The inn of which I had spoken was still a mile before me, and it was possible that I might find assistance there; but I had little hope of this as I threw the bridle over my arm and set out once more on foot, the mare walking at my side with hanging head. A bed I might find, but hardly a smith at this hour, or another horse to serve my turn. In addition, the personal danger that I ran was increased a thousandfold. But I was not prone to yield to despair, and so with my face set I ploughed resolutely through the mud that came quite over my ankles.

After a little while I heard the barking of a dog, by which sign I knew that the inn was not now far distant, and in a short time after, from the top of the hill, I spied a light, small and stationary, by the roadside. As we came up my mare gave a joyful whinny, and I confess that I myself welcomed the thought of a cheerful fire and a draught of wine, for I was very wet and cold.

I knocked loudly upon the door, and waited for an answer. The folk were not yet abed, for I could hear the sound of voices and see the lights in two of the windows above. After a while there came a shambling step upon the stone passage, and a rough voice on the other side of the door asked my errand.

"My horse has broken down," I cried, "and I want help—a blacksmith or a bed. You keep a strange place of entertainment."

"Do you travel alone?"

My answer was apparently satisfactory, for presently I heard the withdrawal of bolts, which matter seemed to me to take a great time, and then the door opened. The man whom I saw carried a candle, which he sheltered with his hand from the wind that swirled in the doorway.

"You travel late and hard," he said, looking me up and down. "Whence do you come at this hour?"

"That is my business," I answered shortly. "My horse has cast a shoe and I would find a smith."

He opened his eyes and mouth, and seemed to find an excellent jest in my words, for he laughed a great hoarse laugh. "Six miles to Weighcombe is a long step and a bad road, but there you will find the nearest forge. Honest John Smith is no doubt abed drunk, but it is your best chance. Good-night."

He would have shut the door in my face if I had not suddenly placed my knee between that and the door-post, and pushed it open with my shoulder.

"You keep a strange house," I cried, now very angry, for I could read in his eyes that my coming was very unwelcome. "You know that I cannot find Weighcombe in this plight, and I now tell you that I ride hot-spur for life and death. Can you find me a horse?"

"A camel or an elephant," he answered with a snort of contempt. "First comes the Parliament, then comes the King, and between them they leave me neither skin nor feather. There is a pedlar's ass, indeed, in the outhouse; him they—"

"I am in no mood for jesting," I cried. "I must have a horse or a guide to Weighcombe. I shall pay you well—"

"Pay or no pay, you can have neither horse nor guide. I am alone here with my two maids, and have neither man nor boy."

I saw from his face that he spoke the truth, and that time was lost in further wrangling. However urgent my need, and Heaven knows I felt its urgency,

there was no help for it, and I saw clearly that I must remain here till morning. That I saw, but I could not repress the great tide of despair and chagrin that swept over me for the moment. My wild words but set him looking at me the more curiously.

"I can find my way at daybreak," I went on, "and, meantime, I must have a bed and a stable for my horse."

"Must is a fine word for the strongest hand," he answered bitterly; "but my beds are full. Listen."

There came a shout of laughter from within.

"I have guests more than enough. I doubt that you are another of the same sort—long swords and wide wallets. I am like to have my throat cut among you all. These are Goring's lambs; whose black sheep are you?"

I thought I had now taken the man's measure, and I answered his rough speech in temperate language. In a little time he made some show of yielding, and after a brief space returning to the house for a lantern, led me to the stable at the rear.

Much to my surprise, I found the stalls already full. I turned to my host for an explanation, when I found him surveying me carefully. He had laid down the lantern, and stood with his hands upon his hips. Presently he answered my look of inquiry in an altered tone:

"I thought I knew your face, sir, but I see it clearly now. Lord bless me! 'twas a great fight, and Dick Spragge's face never found its natural shape again. You were a rare good one with your hands."

In a moment this forgotten incident flashed upon my mind. On one of my journeys from Oxford I had halted here with two companions. The tapster had provoked my deep resentment by his treatment of the lad who waited on our horses, and for half a summer afternoon we had faced one another in the stable-yard. Being little the worse for my encounter, the matter had wholly passed from my memory.

"Much has happened since then," I answered. "I have more serious business now. For heaven's sake, carry me to Weighcombe yourself."

He made a gesture of despair.

"I have six tall fellows in my house whose fingers itch to rifle the pockets and cut the throat of an honest grazier who is now a-bed upstairs. My maids are not comely, and me they will not harm, but I am no true man if there is not murder done before the morning. I cannot leave my house."

"Like myself they have ridden hard," I said, pointing to the stalls. "This will be the grazier's horse. He is well mounted."

He saw the thought that was in my mind.

"No good can come of that, sir ; you must not do it. I keep an honest house, and at daybreak, if I live, I will see that you are at John Smith's. Besides, you may help me to keep the peace here."

"There seems to be no help for it," I said, leading my horse to a vacant stall and removing the saddle. "Goring's men, did you say ?"

"They wear the devil's livery and serve no other," he answered bitterly. "Masterless rogues that they are, they care for nothing but to stab and steal."

"Then I stand by the grazier," I said with a careless laugh, thinking that the man's unreasoning fear had created the danger that he dreaded.

I saw my horse littered and fed ; then my host, again taking up his lantern, led me into the house. But when I came into the parlour of the inn, I very speedily changed my mind. I purposely made some parade of my sword and the pistols which I carried in my hand, for the fellows whom I saw here altogether beggared the description the innkeeper had given me. Ragged and unkempt, their faces showed the wild passions which war engenders. I thought them beasts of prey rather than men, as they turned to look at me when I entered. Two of them, with their boots pulled off, sat by the fire, while the other four were seated at the table playing at cards with a

greasy pack, though I saw no money. A very brief salutation passed between us. Then I went up to the fire which burned very brightly, and bade my host bring me a bottle of wine and get me ready a bed. When he had gone, I watched my company narrowly out of the corner of my eye, and saw that they talked together in signs which I did not understand. But I understood enough to know that the grazier, if such he was, and myself stood in some peril, and I was not anxious to increase my own danger.

One of them, whom the others called the Caster, eyed me with particular ill-will, and for him I conceived an aversion that amounted almost to loathing. He had a shock of red hair, a most forbidding squint, and a great scar, freshly healed, which ran down his left cheek to the chin. On the back of his hand, which he kept concealed, I caught sight of the mark of a branding-iron, and I felt certain that he fully deserved to carry the letter I had no doubt was imprinted there. In a very hoarse voice he asked me did I ride east or west, but I had seemed not to hear the question, and continued quietly to dry my cloak before the fire. They had suspended their play for a little while, but having, as I supposed, made up their minds with regard to me, they resumed their game.

"Perhaps the gentleman will cut in when his toes are warmed?" one of them said in a tone so loud that I could not but reply.

"I have a long ride before me," I answered pleasantly, "and I start early. I am but waiting till my bed is ready."

"A fly cove, Dick!" cried the Caster with a foul oath. "I warrant he has shelled his own peas before now."

I saw the fellow was not unwilling to pick a quarrel with me, which I was most anxious to avoid, but I was also anxious to let him see that I could take care of myself.

"If I had leisure, sir," I therefore answered, "nothing would please me better than to play you for

your two ears, but since I have not time for that, I shall be glad if you and your friends will drink a bottle of wine at my charge."

My answer seemed to strike them, for very little more passed between us until the innkeeper returned to say that my bed was ready, and that he would himself see me to my room. I gave him my order about a bottle of wine for the rogues, for which they expressed no thanks, and then followed him upstairs. He halted at the top of the staircase.

"You will sleep here," he said, pointing to a small room on the right, "and there at the end of the passage sleeps the traveller whose horse you would have borrowed. I trust you are a light sleeper, but I am easier in my mind since I know you to be the gentleman who stood up to Dick Spragge. These rogues mean mischief."

"They may mean what they will," I answered, "if they leave me in peace, for I am in no way or mood to quarrel, but I will see no honest man injured if I can help it. I would to God I was on my way again."

"All in good time. I will call you at daybreak, for I think you ride for the king, and though an innkeeper lives by all men, I would myself put out my best foot in his service. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," I said, and I spoke the words lightly, "I will sleep with one eye open if I sleep at all."

He bade me good-night, and I threw myself on the bed dressed as I was. My mind was in such a state of ferment, and so full of clamorous thoughts that I could not sleep; and, moreover, every sound came from the room below with such clear distinctness that I could follow much that was said, though not all. So lewd and foul was the fellows' speech, so full of blasphemy and impure suggestions, that I was turned almost sick with loathing, and vainly endeavoured to shut out the sound of their speech. I was not in the least apprehensive for myself; unarmed, I had perhaps felt less secure, but I thought that though they

might be willing to stab me in the dark, they would yet hesitate to make an open attack upon me. But, indeed, this personal danger did not weigh upon me at all; so fully was my mind fixed and stayed upon the central thought of my great mission, that all else was subordinate and trivial in comparison with that. That the lives and safety of those whom I loved hung, perhaps, on the casting of a shoe, depressed me beyond measure—a thing so small yet fraught with such tremendous issues.

I chafed at the loss of so many precious hours. As I lay staring at the ceiling, my swift mind was divided this way and that, wondering whether I had taken the right course after all, and whether I had not better have endeavoured to find the way to Weighcombe alone. Then I fell into an uneasy sleep, but I still carried my troubled thoughts with me into my dreams.

I was on a great and desolate plain, with the sun, the blood-red heart of a thunder-storm, throbbing low down in the west. I rode alone in that desolation pursued by a thousand fears; rode with dripping spur and failing heart. Suddenly I was in the midst of a hideous quagmire, and the soft ooze had caught my gallant horse, and held him fast. Ever deeper and deeper he sunk in the yielding slime. I pulled and shouted in vain, till the sweat broke upon my forehead and my eyes ached with pain. Then I thought Colonel Death was beside me with the ceaseless mocking smile upon his face, and I heard again the burden of his song—

“The lime is wet and the snare is set,
But the little brown bird is merry, oh.”

And then as I turned upon him it was not the face of Death that I saw, but the leering ruffian, the Caster, whom I had left in the room below stairs, and his naked blade was at my heart.

In my efforts to reach him I think I awakened. The candle still burned where I had left it, but with

a feeble, ineffectual light. The wild panic of my dream was still upon me, and altogether unnerved and unmanned I lay for a minute endeavouring to recover my disordered thoughts, for my dream had moved me deeply.

But I lay thus hardly a minute ; in an instant I was upon my feet, and had laid my hand upon my sword. In a flash of thought I was again myself. I rather divined than heard what had taken place in the room below, and I now knew that I stood face to face with great and pressing danger. A muttered oath, a momentary struggle, and a heavy fall—these were the three acts in the drama that I knew was being enacted beneath me. The innkeeper had known his men better than I ; they were not such cowards as I had supposed, and it might go hard with the grazier and myself, for we were far from help, and had none but ourselves to depend upon.

I threw open the door of my bedroom, and stepped to the head of the staircase. I stood and listened. The stairs were yet in darkness, and I could catch no sound where I stood. Then I made up my mind as to the course I should take. The tragedy beneath was finished, and I was powerless to help ; or likely, perhaps, to add another victim. The other guest, as I had learned, slept at the end of the passage. There I could see a little ray of light streaming from a crevice in the door, and for this I made, swiftly and silently. For what reason I do not know, I had little hope of finding a man here who could give me much aid ; perhaps it was the innkeeper's tone in referring to his guest, but I thought there might be more safety in added numbers.

I had left the light behind me burning in my bedroom, and passed down the corridor with my weapon in my hand. The door was shut, but the light, as I have said, streamed faintly through. Here I knocked softly, but there was no response. Without waiting to knock again, knowing that I had now little time left, I felt for the lock of the door, and pushed it open.

As I stepped into the room, with my naked sword in my hand, a strange and curious sight met my eyes. A candle nearly burned down, and with a very long wick, was placed upon a small table in the centre of the room. Here a man knelt, with his head bowed upon his hands, that were clasped upon a book that lay open before him. On the table, also, lay a sword and a great horse-pistol.

As I came in, altogether taken aback at the sight, I halted, and let the point of my rapier fall on the floor. It was at the sound of this that he raised his head.

I thought at the time, and I still think, that a more wonderful thing never happened.

The man, as I have said, raised his head, but without the least sign of surprise or wonder in his face—not more moved than if my entrance had been looked for and expected. His eyelids never trembled ; his lips did not move.

Then very slowly, and with his eyes fixed upon me, he turned down the leaf, and closed the book. After that he rose to his feet, and drew himself up to his full stature.

At that time I did not take in all the nice details and particulars of his person. This I did afterwards, but now I could see only the deep-set grey eyes that fascinated me beyond measure, and burned like the central fire of a slumbering volcano. He was a tall and heavy man, with a red face, somewhat swollen, and clad in a grey suit of a very homely fashion. At first sight, a common figure made for common uses, but his forehead and his eyes spoke a different language, and I could not but wonder at the mistake the innkeeper had made when he spoke of him in a slighting manner. Besides, he travelled well armed, his sword-hilt being richly chased, and his pistol mounted in silver.

"Is yours a peaceful errand, friend?" he said in a loud, unpleasant voice, looking for a moment at the sword I carried.

His tone of voice was that of one altogether uncon-

cerned, not careless or reckless indeed, but unmoved and self-restrained. But his eyes—and here I speak the thought that struck me afterwards—were losing the fine glow and fire that filled them when I first entered the chamber. They were gradually turning cold and hard in their expression. His full lips were growing tense.

“I had not intruded on your privacy, sir, without grave reason. There will be six tall fellows here anon to give us trouble, and I had hoped that we might help one another in a pinch. They mean murder; I think they have begun already.”

“A sparrow cannot fall to the ground,” he answered in the same unmoved tone, only now laying his hand on his sword, and drawing it nearer to him, “without my Father knowing it. We are in His keeping, and they cannot harm me.”

“For you,” I cried, greatly stirred, “I think I could answer also, but for myself, I know they will cut my throat if I cannot keep it whole. You have a good weapon there, and I hope you know its use.”

He smiled a strange smile, and took up the sword in his hand.

“The Lord has wrought in olden days by its power,” he said, withdrawing it from the sheath, “and the wicked have perished by its might. The Pestilence, the Whirlwind, and the Sword are the sable angels that do His will. Behold, we cannot see it, but in after days, where their feet have trodden, the desert blossoms like the rose. From the beginning of the world it was so ordered and set out. For me, my work is not yet done, and I do not fear. Nevertheless, it was foolish in me to travel thus.”

“We cannot mend it now,” I said; “we can keep the stairs against them.”

“You are a young counsellor,” he said, with his grave smile, “and a bold spirit. My faith is not in carnal weapons, though they are needed. Hark!”

“They have opened the door,” I said, “and are now upon the stairs. We will be too late.”

"Patience, patience. Be seated."

He pointed to a vacant chair beside the table, and in spite of myself, nay, wondering at myself the while I did as he bade me. For himself, he glanced for a moment at the chamber door that lay ajar, and then took the other chair, but I noticed all the while that his pistol lay close at his hand. I knew now that I sat in presence of a great man.

"I saw these men," he said calmly, his hand resting on the table, "as I sat at supper, and I wondered how they had strayed hither—carrion that seek the refuse and the offal. The godly General Ireton holds the roads, and even now there is a troop of horse at hand. I had heard they would arrive here at ten—'tis now long after midnight. That interests you?" he cried, bending on me a quick, searching look.

"Sir, I am more interested in the troop that is now on the staircase; they have reached the landing."

"Six, did you say?"

"Six stout rogues."

"And armed?"

"Well armed, I think."

"Your observation jumps with mine. We are safer here. A pistol shot can travel up a flight of stairs. You are not afraid?"

I own that I was listening to the sounds outside with my heart beating loudly in my breast, and I confess now that to sit there and make no sign tried my nerves beyond all expression. But in the presence of this will stronger and more strenuous than my own, I tried to look unconcerned, and answered lightly—"I am ready for the entertainment."

"Here," he said, laying his hand upon the book that still lay upon the table, "is that which gives strength, and fortitude, and courage beyond all measure. He hath a strong tower thrice girdled round whose hope is fixed. His truth shall be thy shield and buckler."

Not once did he seem to change the inflection of his voice—that unmoved and solemn tone with its

strange enunciation—while outside I heard the sound of stealthy steps and the hum of muffled voices. I knew the fellows without had entered my room and found me flown; I knew also they had halted in debate. The half-opened door at the end of the passage, the light and the silence, had puzzled and perplexed them.

While my companion was still speaking, I again heard the footsteps advancing along the passage, and once—but only once—the clank of a weapon.

Then the door was pushed widely open, and there, framed in the doorway, was the most forbidding picture I had ever beheld in my life. My heart gave a great leap, and almost instinctively I was about to rise from my seat. But I caught the eye of my fellow-traveller fixed upon me for a moment, and I forbore. For him, he looked up calmly at the group gathered in the doorway and made no other sign.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREY SUIT.

WHEN I think upon this incident, the one thing that stands out in clear relief beyond my own personal peril, the safety of my mission, and the thousand fears that filled my heart and for the moment made me quite their creature, was the conduct of this singular man who had so dominated my will and imagination. At no time prone to yield my leading to another or responsive to control, I yet surrendered myself wholly to his guidance, nor once sought to question the wisdom of his acts. I felt that in this matter I had no other choice ; he was so calm, so unconcerned, and so fully master of himself that I almost thought he did not realise a deadly peril was imminent upon us. He still remained seated with his head raised and his hands resting on the table before him. But there was such a look in his eyes as I never saw before or since. I had seen them filled, as I thought, with the glow and fire the mystic borrows from his commune with the Unseen ; I had seen them cold and penetrating, but now they fairly glowed like the living coal in the heart of a furnace. There was no other outward sign of emotion ; he had not been more unmoved at his own fireside. And yet the sight that presented itself, and that far from all friendly help, was such as few men could look upon and still carry themselves with a steady nerve.

When the door had been thrown open, as I have said, the Caster, who was a big man and very stoutly made, advanced a step or two into the room with his weapon in his hand. The others hung upon the

threshold, their faces inflamed by the liquor they had drunk, and crouching, as it seemed, like so many beasts in the act to spring. I watched them with the blood tingling in my veins, and as I watched I saw on all their faces the look of surprise and bewilderment that rapidly grew there. Their jaws dropped; their weapons fell. What reception they had expected to find on their entrance I do not know, but this had apparently astonished them beyond all words. Their eyes were fixed, not upon me, but upon my companion, who sat there the central figure in this curious picture.

For a space the silence was so great that the only sound I heard was the beating of my own heart. No one spoke or stirred. Then, and it was the first movement he had made since they entered the room, my fellow-traveller moved the candle to one side—the side nearest him—and snuffed it with his fingers.

"I can see you better now," he said in a voice other than that he had used to me, being now very deep and resonant. "What is your business here?"

The Caster, after a brief pause, plucked up heart and tried to brazen the matter out, but I saw that the fellow quailed; no longer certain of his ground. He came forward a step or two, and gradually the others followed.

"There was no light below stairs, and there is still a bottle or two to crack. A fair exchange is no robbery. Let us have the light, and you will have share of the liquor. This is dry work."

"You have blood upon your hands," said my companion, suddenly rising to his feet, though he did not move from his place, and pointing with his finger at the wretch who stood before him, "You have blood upon your hands, and the devil is still raging in your wicked heart. A light? a halter. Verily, there is brief space left you for repentance now. Your doom has fallen upon you with your sins fresh upon your heads. The feet of them who will carry you out are at the door. Listen; you may hear them now."

I thought at the time that this was but the language of metaphor ; portion of the imaginative speech in which the sectaries were accustomed to indulge ; but, like the others, I was so borne away by the man's power and vehemence, that I found myself listening for the sound. I noticed also now what I had failed to notice before, that there was a red smear on the Caster's hand, and I trembled for my poor friend, the innkeeper. I did not doubt that we should ultimately have to fight for our lives, but I could see that the fellows were thoroughly cowed and mastered for the moment. They had expected to find a very different reception, and their surprise had added to the effect of my companion's words. And though six to two were overmastering odds, I did not doubt they felt their victory would not be an altogether bloodless one. But though I now felt that my companion would prove a valiant man-at-arms, I think that at that time he had himself no thought either of attack or resistance. He was carried away by quite different feelings and emotions.

Then he made two steps forward, and drew a line upon the floor, with his sword held out before him.

"I read your hearts, he cried soberly and gravely ; "that line you dare not pass. You came here to eat the fat and drink the blood, and you are even delivered into my hand. You fear me ; fear rather the arm of God that even now is raised to strike you. Your fate is before you."

He pointed with his hand to the open door, and one of the fellows glanced over his shoulder as though his fear had taken actual shape. All this was spoken very soberly, but in a tone so full of warning and conviction that I can give you no just notion of it. I was myself moved by it to a strange degree. The man in the grey suit possessed such power as I had never seen before. Then the Caster stepped back scowling.

"We are honest men," he said, "and thought to

meet with neighbours. We will finish the good wine by ourselves, and without your help."

I had willingly let them go, and been glad to be rid of them, but my companion had no such thought. He did not seem to share my fears.

"Neither back nor forward," he said sternly, "till you lay down your weapons, and hardly then. I enter into no terms; I make no conditions."

Here he raised his hand, and on that, with a great oath, the Caster drew the pistol that he had concealed. I saw the motion of his hand, and caught the gleam of the steel. He had almost raised the weapon, when, with a quick movement, I leapt from my seat, and swept the candle and candlestick from the table to the floor with one movement of my arm.

We were instantly plunged in a darkness so profound that I could distinguish nothing. But that was only for a moment. Following immediately on this there came a great flash that lighted up the room, and a loud report. I thought I heard the bullet singing past me. The momentary spell was broken, and we must now fight for our lives.

I never waited to think, but, dark as it was, sprang toward the door, calling on the man in grey to follow me. I thought the room was clear, and that we might safely keep the doorway. But I had hardly gained the threshold than I felt myself seized in a close embrace, and a foul and vinous breath upon my cheek. I was almost strangled. But my blood was now up, and with a loud exclamation, born of my excitement, I strove to tear myself from the iron grip that encircled me. I heard a voice calling for a light, and I think one ran to fetch it. That was all that I could distinguish in the wild tumult and then, suddenly breaking from its veil of cloud, the moonlight streamed through the unshuttered window, and filled the chamber with its iridescent light.

I saw my fellow-traveller close beside me, and the Caster's hideous face almost against my own. The rest were still crowded by the door. I strove to

tear myself from the grip in which I was held, but I was quite unable; I was being borne across the threshold step by step. Then I suddenly remembered the sword that I carried in my hand. I shortened my grasp upon it, and ran the man through the body. Almost upon the moment he threw up his arms with a wild despairing cry, and swinging round, fell in a heap on the floor before me. Having now disengaged myself, though with a singing in my head, I stepped a pace backward and waited for the rush.

The moonlight, streaming through the lattice, shone full behind me, and I stood almost in the centre of that sweet, clear light. Then with a wild cry, like a pack of wolves in chase, the fellows leapt over the prostrate body with an instant flash of sword blades. My companion stood close beside me, one arm behind his back and his sword guarding him like a wall. All this time he had been quite silent, nor did he speak a word till the end.

For a moment we were almost borne back, so sudden and brisk was the attack, but presently we stood point to point. I know that my companion did not stir a step. I saw his sword pass under his opponent's guard with a quick, silent movement—pass like a flash of light—and, though I had myself enough to do, in the excitement of the moment I could not help it, but I cried out, "Well struck, Grey Suit."

The stricken man went reeling backward, catching at the place where he had been struck, and fell against the open door, where he lay motionless.

"The odds are less now," I cried; "we have them yet."

We were now, indeed, but three to two, the man who had gone for the light not having yet returned. But for the present they seemed to have had nearly enough of the game. I knew from the way they met us that they were losing heart, and but little more would send them flying. Therefore, I pressed upon

them the more boldly, and with hope that we had nearly seen the end. And that came almost more speedily than I had hoped. After a few more passes they fell back as though by common consent, and turning round, fled down the passage for their lives. I would have followed, but my unknown friend stopped me.

"You have fought a good fight," he said, "and I like your courage. They are still four to two, and may return, but I think not. In any case, we will wait here and see how the wrath of heaven waits on those whose feet are swift to the shedding of blood. It is now at hand."

We stood there looking at one another in the moonlight and the silence. Then one of the fallen men groaned and stirred uneasily where he lay. But my companion never took his eyes from mine or seemed to hear the sound. He wore a very grave and stern expression. I had not understood his last words, nor did I understand the look upon his face.

"You have done more this night than you can think or dream," he said slowly. "It is not by strength nor by valour that the Kingdom of God is builded up, yet but for the motion of your hand a great and marvellous work— What is your name?"

In wonder I answered briefly.

"Then, Mr. Duncombe, I think you have preserved my life this night; nor my life alone, which in itself is of little moment, but the work for which I labour, and the end that lies in me. Our steps are in dark places. At all times when we trust ourselves we fail and err. This night— Ha! here they come at last!"

He went rapidly to the window, and threw open the lattice. As I say, the moonlight was now broad and full, and I saw him leaning forth, his left hand resting upon the wall. At the same time, I heard a sound that brought me to myself—the trampling of a troop of horse, the clank and din of weapons, and the voices of the riders. They were close at hand, so close that

almost before I reached the window, which I did in an instant, the foremost troopers were in the open space before the house, and were dismounting from their horses. The moonlight made a brave show upon their gleaming swords and head-pieces, and I saw where I stood, that the troopers wore the red coats of that famous regiment, the Ironsides of Cromwell. I was thrown into a great consternation at the sight, seeing no possible chance of escape, and my mission brought to a sudden and disastrous end. I say that I was thrown into a great fear, but I knew that flight meant instant discovery, and I therefore determined to stand my ground.

The man in grey waited for a minute looking down, and then called out with the voice of one accustomed to be obeyed, "Surround the house, and force the door ; let none escape."

I saw the men below halt at the sound of his voice, for they had not seen us where we stood and watched ; but almost on the instant the command was obeyed. I heard one word spoken that filled me quite with wonder, and set me looking at my silent companion—"That is the general's voice ; there is mischief here."

Then, as in a flash of light, all was made plain to me.

I wondered at my own blindness. No faint suggestion of the truth had forced itself upon me ; I had never thought of this in any surmise I had made. But now I understood the mastery and power this man had exercised over me ; I had myself seen that invincible courage and cold reserve of which I had faintly heard. If I feared before, I was hopeless now that I might get through.

The house was surrounded in a brief space, and that very quietly. Then the door was forced ; but my companion never stirred until he saw that the soldiers had entered, but stood looking with the same hard, unmoved face. I myself did not speak a word, but kept a little behind, looking out blankly on the moving picture.

"We will now," he said, turning round very quietly, "see that righteous judgment done whereof I spoke. The sword hath been committed to my hand, and I am but the instrument that uses it. We are thankless and unmindful men," he continued, "but forget not the favour Heaven hath shown us both this night."

I made no answer, but followed him across the room, past the groaning wretches who lay by the door in a heap, and so down the passage. When we entered the large room where I had been before, my companion going first with his sword still bare in his hand, our late assailants were already bound, and stood with their hands behind their backs. Two of the troopers had raised the innkeeper, who was now able to sit up, though he had a great gash upon his head, and seemed confused and wandering in his mind.

As we came in a clear space was made for us in the centre of the room, the men falling back with a grave salute, and more expressionless than stone. My companion seemed to take in everything at a glance. "You are nearly two hours behind your time, Captain Lambert," he said; "your delay was like to have cost me dear."

"Our guide mistook his way," Lambert answered, "and carried us some seven miles out. I trust your excellency ran no danger?"

"Danger! no. Our span is measured for us, long or short; man is immortal till his task is done. There was no danger."

Lambert glanced at the weapon the speaker carried in his hand; they both looked at it for an instant, and their eyes met. We all saw that it was red with a recent stain.

"But, pardon me, your excellency has not been hurt?"

"There was no danger. I have not been touched," the other replied coldly, as I thought, and with a studied manner. "There was a power that guarded

me greater than the power of regiments. Truly, we are poor vessels made to dishonour, but the Lord hath need of us for His great work. Who am I, to whom He should vouchsafe His mercy? There is one thing more. The blood-guilty man shall perish in his wicked way. Take a file of troopers forth, and see that justice is done without delay. Upstairs are two others: take them all, and make an end. This poor kingdom must be swept and garnished."

"I knew this was no more than they had deserved, the just punishment of their evil deeds, but for a moment I was struck with dismay at the cold and brutal way in which the order had been given. His manner was hard and deliberate; nor did he once turn his eyes toward the despairing wretches, who set up a great cry, and begged piteously for even an hour's respite. I was myself moved exceedingly, being yet new to these great issues, and it seemed to me a great thing to speak the word on which their lives depended.

But this man never changed a tone of his voice, nor betrayed the least emotion by a look; only while his order was being obeyed he went over to the hearth, and kicked the smouldering embers with his heel. I myself still stood in the middle of the room very ill at ease. I knew that I presented a strange figure in the gay attire for which I had exchanged my sodden clothes earlier in the night. I saw their wonder written large on the faces of the troopers. But no question was put to me or to the silent man by the hearth, who had turned his back upon us all. Then the living wretches were led out; the dead or dying—for I do not know in which condition they were—were brought downstairs, and I was left quite alone with my late ally. Then and not till then he turned round where he stood upon the hearth, and eyed me under his brows.

"You ride to Oxford, sir? Nay," he went on, seeing me about to answer, "do not equivocate with me. I think I know your errand, but I will not ask you further lest it tempt you from the truth."

"Sir," I cried with intemperate haste, "neither you nor any man will tempt me."

He did not seem to heed my interruption, but went on as though I had not spoken.

"I have been debating with myself whether I should let you pass—ha! that moves you,—but I think I may and shall. I dare not let any obligation of my own—and I owe you something—stand in the way of the public need and the common good, but here I think that I can pleasure you and do no injury. Were it otherwise, whatever pain it cost me I should do my duty, for we are but the instruments chosen to do this great work, and set this house in order. Let me see—you live at Duncombe?"

I thought for a moment the man laughed at me. Certainly his eyes lighted, and a smile played about his lips, but the transition in his speech was so sudden that I stood quite blank. I did not see at once where this question led me, but immediately after I saw and cursed my blundering tongue.

"There are birds in the air, Mr. Duncombe," he went on with a smile; "birds that carry tales and make no sign. 'Tis not far from Duncombe to Beauchamp Hall, and mine was but a common guess. You may ride post-haste, and I will speed you, but you are too late. Not all the power in Oxford can now save your friends."

"With your permission, none the less I will go on," I said, altogether overcome. "But for my horse breaking down, I had now been far on the road."

"A fool's journey. We hold the roads as far as Banbury, and none can pass. How you came so far I do not know, but you are bold and cautious. I would you were with us."

"I stand with the king," I cried. "Sir, you said you owed me something, though—"

"I am no tempter," he interrupted, still smiling gravely, and discovering the very thought that was in my mind, "and do not seek to change your purpose. It is not thus that the foundations are laid and the

City Beautiful is builded up—by prayer and fasting and by watching even till the ninth hour we must do this work. And who will stay or question us? A false and faithless king, a fickle people, broken laws, voided promises and perjured oaths, these be arrayed before us. We will not fail nor falter whithersoever our path may lead us—nay, though it lead to the foot of the scaffold and the headsman's axe. Pshaw, this is no time for idle dreams. Mr. Duncombe, this night you saved my life."

"Nay, sir—"

"Whatever his enemies may say, you have a friend in Cromwell, and he does not forget his obligations. Some time I may have it in my power to repay you. Even as the grain of mustard seed—"

While he was speaking there came the discharge of firearms, and a low, despairing cry that thrilled me through and through. Cromwell never paused in his speech, but went on composedly, though I was quite deaf to all he said. I stood there, indeed, listening, but I heard no word. My eyes were fixed upon his face, but the blood left my cheeks, and my heart was filled with the terror of the tragedy.

What he said I do not know, or only faintly remember, but he continued his speech till Lambert returned and whispered something that I could not catch.

"On his life, no!" cried Cromwell in answer. "His usefulness depends on that. He must ride back with us. This gentleman, Captain Lambert," he continued in a measured voice, turning toward me, "is riding eastward to meet a bankrupt friend. He would ride fast, and I would further him in return for some slight service he has done me. See that he has a fresh horse and a pass—I myself will sign it—and see him safely on his road. We ourselves must be up and stirring."

I made haste to express my gratitude, but he stopped me with a frown.

"No favour, no thanks," he said. "Your friend is

broken and you ride too late. Had it been otherwise, you had not stirred a step."

This strange man, of whose fame I had already heard so much, perplexed and bewildered me beyond measure. The characters of other men are plain and legible to read, but of him I knew not, nor do I yet know, what to think. I had seen him with the altar-glow upon his face, and the fire and fervour of the mystic in his eyes, prompt and resolute in action, cold and pitiless in his vengeance, and a moment after almost frank and friendly. The learned historian of the future may dissect his character, and hold him forth to scorn and obloquy, or crown him with the laurel and the bay, but I thought that in one brief hour at midnight I had caught a glimpse of his true stature and his secret power.

At daybreak I was once more upon my way, heading toward Oxford, but now no longer with exulting hope and courage, but desponding and depressed. Cromwell's words had filled me with dismay. They sounded like a warning and a prophecy. I felt that this man could not fail, and when I came to think upon it, his swift discernment of my errand, by instinct, almost, as it seemed, was past all wonder. But I did not know at that time what strings he held in his hand, nor with what thousand eyes he saw. But this I felt, that ride with all the speed I might, no effort of mine could now save Beauchamp Hall. This thought gave me no rest or peace. It repeated itself a thousand times. It filled me with despair.

I saw before me, as I rode, the face of my mistress, so strong and sweet, flushed with its loyal ardour; I saw the little knot of loyal gentlemen, with their swords drawn round me, drinking the health of the king they loved; and I saw the ruin and havoc of war, and the horror of siege and onset; and ten times, nay, a thousand, I had almost drawn my bridle to return. Cromwell's pass, that lay in my bosom, was continual warning that I rode in vain. I saw his

smile as he handed it to me, and I heard his mocking words. If I had known what lay in the future I had torn it into fragments there on the road and scattered them to the winds. But I did not know toward what dark paths my steps were tending ; I did not know how much misery these few lines were to bring me.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KING'S COUNTENANCE.

I HALTED to bait my horse at Banbury, and finally arrived at Oxford toward nightfall quite worn out with want of sleep and rest. I had travelled fast and hard, so hard that when I dismounted in the courtyard of the Wheatsheaf, I reeled and would have fallen but for the crupper of my saddle to which I clung. Here I swayed for a minute till the ostler gave me his arm and helped me into the house. There was a wild whirling in my head and a singing in my ears, and for a time I could see only as through a cloud. But presently this passed away, and I found myself sitting in my host's parlour and him pouring a dram of aguar-diente down my throat in liberal and copious measure. Then he drew back a space as I recovered, and regarded me with a more cheerful air and a smile on his ruddy countenance. We were old acquaintances; many an afternoon, an idle student, I had trolled catches and played at cards in the trim garden in the rere, or emptied tankards of October with other graceless youths in this parlour where I sat.

"These are changed days, Mr. Duncombe," said John Goodman, "since I saw you last. Lord, to think of it! only to think of it! The fine young gentlemen that used to laugh and sit where you are sitting now—your friends and the king's—God help and bless him!—scattered and gone; and I used to grumble at the score; scattered and gone, with their tricks and merry faces. Mr. Killigrew is dead at Marston; the tall young gentleman that would not have his hair cut—I forget his name; ay, Challis, that was it—was

shot down at Stratton, and Mr. Verney, he that used to write the verses on the window panes, was slain at Shrewsbury, and many another gallant lad. And your brother, sir, Mr. Philip, the quiet young gentleman—dead too? I thought I had heard that, but was not sure. Only to think of it! You and Mr. Leigh are the last; I saw him a month ago."

"And I but yesterday—I think 'twas yesterday. I have travelled here to see his majesty."

"Ay, ay, more news and bad news; that comes by every post. When I saw you riding in I saw you brought your budget, though I hoped it was otherwise. Do you ride from the south, sir?"

"I come from home," I answered, "where we must have help. Let me have something to eat and drink, for I am famished, and a room where I may wash my hands. I must see his majesty without delay."

But Boniface did not stir.

"Help, that is still the cry—help from Oxford, when the poor gentleman hath enough to do to help himself. The Marquis in the north, and Hopton in the south, and Goring, God knows where. Prince Rupert came in yesterday, and I hear brought another tale of trouble. There is no end to them."

"Nor to your tongue, either," I said petulantly. "For God's sake leave me, and do my bidding."

"The old way, Mr. Duncombe, the old way," he answered imperturbably; "hot to hold and swift to jump. You have not altered much. But there, sit down, and Marjorie will get your room ready. She will be glad to see you, and the old tap is still running. You remember it?"

"I have not forgotten it, but I think your tongue has grown more nimble."

"Very like, very like! Oxford scholars and king's troopers loosen a man's tongue in spite of himself, but for old times' sake you will have a bottle of my best."

Six flying years had passed since I had last been in this room; six flying years that lay like a gulf be-

tween that time and this. The innkeeper's words had brought me back to that merry time again with its roses and careless mirth ; the songs we sang, the cups we drank, the games we played. I heard the voices of my friends, I saw the dear familiar faces—scattered and broken like the mist that passes into rain ; their young lives gone out in nameless battlefields, their songs and laughter stilled for ever. And I do not know why the question rose to my lips, "Who next?" and I answered as I sat looking into the glowing embers—"Even I, if there is need of me."

I was in the lowest spirits at this time that a man could well be, for the haunting thought of the incidents of the last night followed me like a dark shadow. I was weary and miserable and filled with the sense of loss and of failure. The shadow of the great Puritan captain had fallen across my path. However I might strive to shut them out, his words rang in my ears, "we will not fail nor falter;" and they sounded like a knell upon my heart.

These thoughts pursued me while I supped, hardly loosing their hold upon me under the influence of my host's excellent canary ; nor did they leave me when I gained the street.

It was not quite seven o'clock when I left the tavern. The crowded life and movement contrasted strangely with the cloistral quiet of the city as I knew it.

Soldiers in buff coats lounged by the doorways, filled the taverns, and crowded all the streets. They leaned from the windows, cracking their coarse jokes on the heads of the passers-by, or jostled those who went unarmed into the kennels. I saw gentlemen also ruffling it with the loudest, and many women flaunting their gaudy raiment with immodest faces. It was a scene of merry-making and carousal that stood out in startling contrast to the stern repression and iron discipline of the troops I had seen yesterday.

When I reached the lodging of the king, which I did shortly, I found the courtyard crowded with swordsmen and lackeys, the old decorum of the

court being now quite gone. Being new to such scenes, I was at first bewildered, and all my inquiries were met with coarse laughter and coarser jests. If I had been minded to quarrel, I had met with a thousand provocations, but I put aside all the affronts I met with, though quite filled with indignation and anger. Once, indeed, I was on the point of breaking forth. One fellow, in answer to my inquiry, had pointed me to a door, where I had found a passage, and after a long and aimless wandering here, I had found myself in the courtyard again. I had bitter thoughts in my heart and bitter words on my tongue, but I kept my temper under control, and determined to find my way myself. One gentleman of the king's guard, indeed, gave me some directions, and after a while I found myself in a great chamber, a sort of ante-room, I thought, where there were many gentlemen and pages. Opposite the door where I had entered was another door with four soldiers on guard. I knew that I should find the king here, and I had determined to deliver my message to no one else.

Making my way through the crowded room, I reached the door of which I have spoken, and here the ushers barred my passage. They looked at me in surprise, astonished, as I think, at my boldness. But being new to courts, and spurred on by the urgency of my tidings, I declared that I must pass, and declined to take any refusal.

"In no case can the king see you. Prince Rupert has an audience now."

"That is the more reason, then, why I should see the king," I cried. "I have ridden hither sixty miles with urgent news. It cannot wait."

"Mr. Ashburnham yonder will see to your business; you cannot enter."

I think that I was now almost distraught with impatience and anger, for I refused to leave my ground, and still persisted in my demand to enter.

"I can see none save his majesty," I said, "and my tidings will not bear delay."

A little group of gentlemen that was near were listening to our conversation with amusement written on their faces. "A messenger from Bedlam," I heard one of them say, "who has ridden post in a phrensy."

"Too much wine before supper," cried another. "He comes to ask the order of the pump."

But for a while I did not seem to hear them, still hoping that in some way I should find an entrance into the presence chamber. Then one of the gentlemen came forward, and with a very low bow, asked me how things were going where I came from.

I knew that it was part of a comedy they sought to play at my expense, and at this I broke through my restraint, and answered with that glowing heat that makes a man speak quietly :

"Ill, sir, very ill. I have ridden here to tell the king his friends in Warwick are dying for his sake, while those in Oxford are making sport of their distress."

I do not know what answer he would have made to this, but I saw the laughter had died on his face and the faces of his friends. Then a gentleman, very quietly dressed and with an air of grave importance, came up and stopped to listen. He took me by the arm and led me to one side. I knew that he was a personage of some consideration by the way in which the gentlemen fell back. I was myself attracted by his quiet courtesy.

"There are," he said, "certain forms to which you seem a stranger, but I think you bring us pressing news. Will you let me help you?"

He listened to me with his head slightly bowed, and an expression on his face growing ever more anxious and concerned. When I had finished, he stood for a moment in deep thought.

"You do indeed bring news of weight," he said, lifting his eyes to mine. "We had been looking for this money, and want it sorely, and yet—and yet—Mr. Duncombe, you have done his majesty much service, and to himself you shall deliver your message.

I will take that upon myself. 'Tis but another stroke."

He took me almost familiarly by the arm, and leading me to the door, pushed aside the tapestry that concealed it. Then we entered the presence chamber.

I stood filled with that great sense of loyalty that runs, I think, as a heritage in my blood, and then slowly my senses took in the scene before me. It was a great room, wainscotted to the ceiling, with some portraits and armour upon the walls. At the end was a kind of canopy, and here was a low dais covered with some crimson stuff that showed very bright in the candlelight. In an instant I recognised the king. He was seated upon a chair, with his head resting upon his hand. All that I saw at first was the order that glittered upon his breast, his face very pale and troubled, his eyes dark and glowing, and his forehead white and high. There were nearly a dozen gentlemen present, and one whose back was turned toward me was speaking in a high, raised voice with a foreign accent. He spoke with some heat and many gestures. I judged that this was the king's nephew, for I could not think that any other would presume to speak with so much boldness in the presence.

For a while withdrawn into the background, I could not hear what was being said, but presently I was able, and I listened in great astonishment.

"Your majesty will know that this gentleman is my friend," he said, "and he must therefore suffer. I have tried to serve your majesty, looking to no profit or reward. But it seems that all I do is ill done, and those I favour must be cast aside. All that I counsel must be left neglected, and now this gentleman, my friend, has been removed, because he stands with me."

"My Lord Digby," added a second gentleman, with a sneer, "has your majesty's ear to the exclusion of your friends."

"And Digby is a traitor ; I will prove it on his head," added the prince, turning round with a high and passionate countenance.

"Your highness' words are like your charge at Marston," cried the gentleman toward whom he had looked, bowing superciliously ; "there is nothing behind them."

"We know your spirit, sir ; you dare not say this elsewhere."

I own that I was filled with astonishment at the words I heard ; I could scarcely believe that my ears had not played me false. I looked at the king, who still remained seated on his chair. I noticed now that there were two bright spots of colour on his cheeks. He had lifted his head, and was looking at the last speaker with flashing eyes. Then he spoke for the first time since I had entered the presence, and that in a low voice of singularly pure quality.

"Have you, or any of you, further complaint to make or injury to relate ?"

"I have nothing further to say, sir, than that I will not have my friends wronged because they bear me affection."

"Have you all finished ?" the king asked again in the same tone.

They were all silent, and I think they now felt that they had gone too far. The king waited for a minute ; then, rising from his chair, he advanced a step or two, and drew himself to his full stature. I can yet see him standing there, with his worn, pale face and the fire of indignation blazing in his eyes—the piteous picture of falling majesty.

"Then hear me, for I may yet speak in this kingdom. In my presence, at the very foot of the throne, you will not have this or that. You threaten me with your displeasure ; you reproach me with my kindness, as though the crown had already dropped from my head, and the sceptre was wrung from my hand. God knows I have striven to show myself a

gentle master. I have loaded you with favours ; I have crowded you with benefits. And this is my reward ; this is the end. Take part with my enemies and the enemies of my people if you will, but know that I, your king, can stand alone. While I hold the power, I will keep my kingly rights inviolate. You have forgotten I am still your king. Quit my presence, or I may forget that patience which is your safety."

He seemed to have grown taller as he spoke ; he quivered with suppressed passion to his finger-tips (for I noticed this), and his voice rose to the height of his indignation. The king's words had a very great and instant effect. I was myself moved by them to a strange degree, for there was a royal anger in his voice and in the carriage of his person. The rest drew back shamefaced, and Prince Rupert tried to speak, but the king raised his hand imperatively.

"Not a word, sir. Must I give my commands twice? By God's grace, I am still the King of England, and I will exact obedience here. Go."

None of them dared to make any answer. They bowed and quitted the presence, the margrave going last, and lingering, as if still anxious to speak ; but he, too, passed out, and I was then left alone in the chamber with the king.

I had stood, as I have said, in the shadow beyond all observation, but now I hardly knew what I should do. I stood there making no sound, with my eyes fixed upon the solitary figure that still stood motionless looking toward the door. I knew he had not seen me, and he thought he was alone. Then the high colour died quite out of his cheeks ; he sank down in the chair, covering his face with his hands. For a good while he sat thus, making not the least movement, but I thought that I heard a sob in the great silence.

Then he rose up, and I saw there were traces of tears upon his cheeks. I saw that his lips moved as though he was talking to himself, but I failed to catch

the words he spoke. He traversed the room twice in profound agitation, and then his eyes fell upon me, the silent witness of his distress.

I never saw a more instant change pass over a human face; in a moment there was no trace of trouble written there—I stood before the king.

"Who are you, sir, and how came you here?" he said coldly.

"A loyal subject of your majesty," I cried, dropping on my knee, "and your most faithful servant."

"I thought but now I had no subject left nor any faithful servant," he said, with simple dignity and very sadly.

"Ten thousand faithful hearts," I cried, "that would willingly die for your sake, and mine among the first."

He advanced a little, and held out his hand to me with a melancholy smile upon his face, but a smile in which his weary eyes did not share. I pressed his hand to my lips.

"The path of royalty is but a thorny road," he said, "and sometimes we grow weary. And yet I do my people wrong. I think—I think there are faithful hearts among them still."

He did not say this to me, but as though debating with himself, for his eyes did not regard me at all, but were fixed in secret thought. I did not answer, but still knelt, nor dared to raise my eyes to his face. For the time I had forgotten everything but the king; my indignation and loyalty were stirred by that pitiful picture of well-nigh ruined greatness. My heart was touched by the sad yet serene dignity of his face and the sweetness of his manner. The royal purple had been torn aside, and I saw the beating of the human heart.

"Kneel no more to me, my friend," he said; "this royalty of mine is well-nigh but an empty show. You heard my friends—my very kinsman—reproach me to my face, and threaten me with their displeasure. Reproaches, menaces, and scorn—I sometimes think

that I am dreaming or distraught. Dreams—wild dreams.” And then as though suddenly awakening, he spoke to me very shortly—“How came you here, sir?”

“A gentleman of your majesty’s court,” I answered, “hath brought me hither. I had come with news.”

“News! I will hear no more; I know their purport. There is not an hour of the day that tidings of some new disaster does not reach me—misfortune following on misfortune. It is fate—fate, and I am powerless to struggle. I see it in the darkness. Strafford—”

He turned away and left me where I stood.

The gentleman who had introduced me came in quietly at this moment and laid his hand affectionately on the king’s shoulder, leading him some distance away. He spoke some words in a low voice, with much fervour, but they were spoken so that I could not hear. I heard a portion of the king’s reply:

“They think me quite cast down; I read rebellion in their eyes. They dared to threaten in my presence. Jack, Jack, I am quite undone.”

Here they walked out of my hearing, the gentleman’s hand still resting on the king’s shoulder. They stood conversing for a long time at the farther end of the apartment, while I remained standing where they left me, and wishing myself elsewhere. I would not have witnessed this scene for more than I can say. Though his armies still held the field, I thought I saw in this poor, despairing king a royal edifice cast down, a dynasty destroyed, the sceptre departed from the House of Stuart. And standing there I saw another picture—Cromwell with his iron self-control and terrible purpose, the type of the new and coming time.

This thought filled me for a while and possessed me like a vision, till I was recalled to myself by the king and his companion coming back. He had now, at least outwardly, recovered his serenity. His dark

eyes had lost something of their troubled look ; there was even a smile upon his lips.

"Mr. Ashburnham," he said, "has told me something of your service and the tidings that you bring. This loss would be a great calamity. I would hear the story from your own lips."

I told my tale very briefly, passing over my own adventures hastily, and making no mention of my meeting with Cromwell. The king stood watching me narrowly, shadow after shadow, as I thought, passing over his face. After I had finished he questioned me closely, and finally asked me whether I had learned who was in command of the Roundhead troops. When I had told him he turned as with a gesture of despair.

"That man again—I knew 'twas he. His is the hand that strikes the deepest blow and surest stroke. He never fails. And yet we stand here powerless to help ; we cannot spare the troops."

"My friends think they can hold out a fortnight at the least," I said.

"A fortnight ! It might be done," he answered, "and done with safety if—but never—I will not ask his aid. And Cromwell— The stars are fighting in their courses."

I saw once more the look of despair on his face and the deep trouble in his eyes. Mr. Ashburnham saw it likewise.

"Your majesty is wearied and distressed," he said, "and only needing rest. To-morrow is a new day, and will bring clearer counsels."

"There is little rest, Jack, for the head that wears a crown. But I think you are right. We will discuss the matter in the morning, and may find a way, as Gage did at Dennington. That was a bold feat, Mr. Duncombe, but our friends were stronger then."

"We are still willing," I answered, "to lay down our lives in your majesty's royal cause, and can still do bold feats."

"You think so," he said, brightening for a moment.

Then he added, "You are young, too young, but true and faithful. The fallen have few friends. Your gain were on the other side."

"My heart and sword, your majesty, are here ; I seek no other gain."

"Kings are but men," he said, with his weary smile, that touched me exceedingly, "and sometimes forget their kingship. I see that I have still one loyal friend who has tried to do me faithful service."

Here he drew the ring from his finger and looked at me for a moment.

"I remember when this had been a great gift," he said, "and men had given much to gain it. And yet I think you will prize it. Mr. Duncombe."

I knelt down and pressed the royal hand to my lips. I knew there were tears in my voice as I tried, but failed, to express my thanks.

When I had left the presence Mr. Ashburnham followed me into the antechamber, and then drew me aside.

"You have," he said, "seen a piteous sight, with which I grow but too familiar—the best and noblest master, the kindest heart, the tenderest spirit, quite borne down by his misfortunes. Then the darkness passes, and again we see the king, unshaken and serene in all his trouble, and bearing that with constancy. He has borne much to-night ; to-morrow he will be himself again. I should not have admitted you, but you can and will be silent."

I made the best answer that I could, though hardly knowing what to say. The scene had been so different from all that I had imagined that I had not yet fully comprehended it. The reverence that had clothed the king's name had been among my earliest lessons ; it had grown with me, and entered into my blood ; it had become a part of myself. In a moment the purple had been torn away and I had seen the weak, despairing man. My loyalty was nowise shaken, nay, rather it burned with a new and fiercer flame, for my heart was filled with pity at so much

greatness thus cast down; the power seemed altogether gone. I think Mr. Ashburnham read my thoughts in my face, but he only answered them with a look and the pressure of his hand. His thoughts were my thoughts.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW I CAME THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW.

My heart was full of busy thoughts as I turned my steps toward the Wheatsheaf. It was no mere presentiment that had told me my mission was a failure. There was no shadow of hope in the king's words, but rather a certainty that nothing would be attempted or done. I did not regret that my labour had gone for nothing, but I altogether despaired to think of what might, nay, inevitably would, happen in my absence. I knew too well the loyalty of Sir Austin Leigh and his resolution when once moved to action, and I knew the spirit that stirred in the breast of my friend, his son. No sacrifice however great, no misfortune however crushing, would turn them from their duty. While one stone of the old house stood upon another, they would defend it, and count all loss but gain in the cause they loved. Then I pictured Melody Leigh in the midst of these horrors, and I cried out upon myself again and again that I had adventured on this fool's errand. I could, at least, have watched over her, and been free from the thousand doubts and fears that filled me. I might have helped to protect and guard her; here I had done nothing and could do nothing. You can well imagine the thoughts that filled and harassed me, and behind them all I saw the king's white face and heard his despairing cry. That vision haunted me as I went—the shadow of a falling throne and departed majesty. What I had seen was so strange, so unexpected, that it filled me the more with wonder and despair. My

own fortunes were but a feather in the balance ; they did not trouble me at all.

By the time I had reached the door of the Wheat-sheaf I had so worked upon myself that I was in no mood to retire to rest. The burning fever that consumed me, had robbed me of all thought of sleep. I lingered some time in the still crowded street watching the throng that filled the place, but watching it with distant thoughts. Then hardly caring where my steps led me, I left the crowd behind me with its noise and clamour. Presently I found myself in a lonely and retired spot. Here were gardens enclosed by walls, and at times a little open spot. The night was very dark and cold, with here and there in the cloudysky a shimmering stretch of stars. But there was no moon. There was no sound in the still air, only at times a distant clash of bells. The road had now grown quite narrow, and the trees on either side, rising above the walls, met above my head with interlacing boughs.

I had drawn my cloak about my face, and so went moodily on, absorbed in my own desponding thoughts. Presently my foot struck against a stone in the darkness ; I stumbled and had nearly fallen. I stopped for a moment to recover myself, but hardly had I stopped than some one called out a dozen yards beyond me :

"The wine is still in your head, my lord. Faith, my own is buzzing like a swarm of bees at hiving time. Three bottles, and not a drop more, on my faith as a gentleman."

The voice was by no means sober, and I made no answer, but went on quietly till I came up to the speaker, who was leaning against the wall, with his hat held in his hand, and the plume trailing on the ground. I could not see his face, but I could see from his posture that he was far gone in his cups. I was about to pass him, when he staggered forward and caught me by the arm. For a minute I could not disengage myself, he clung to me so tightly, but

at length I freed myself. I had no mind for a drunken quarrel, and was about to pass on, when he caught me up again.

"You have the devil's own temper," he cried angrily in his unreasoning voice, "and after what I have done for you— Why, God's death! the others would not wait. They must pluck Sir John by themselves without your worship. She is a coy baggage, the little Death, and will fight for it. God's wounds! I would see Sir John's face when he comes back and finds his bird flown."

I was instantly all ears, and my hand touched the hilt of my rapier under my cloak. Though he rambled, I had caught the fellow's meaning very clearly. Like a flash of light the name he had spoken, and the place where I stood, carried conviction to my mind. I now remembered my conversation with my late companion on the road to Oxford, and the directions he had given me. Led by some careless chance, it might be I was about to render him a service where it touched him most. The meaning was plain to read in the words I had heard just now. Probably a woman's honour and happiness were at stake—the daughter of the man I had left the night before—and I did not hesitate.

I drew my cloak closer about my face, and turned my head aside. We both quickened our steps, my unknown friend walking somewhat unsteadily, and two or three times catching at my arm for support.

"Thou art a mad wag, Jack," he cried, stumbling heavily. "I'd wager a guinea if I had it—and curse my luck, I have not a denier left—that you cut out Wilmot after all. He thought he had drunk you under the table, but I knew you better. He wants Gloriana to himself, the selfish rogue! 'Twas I unveiled the goddess. Dam'me, we don't travel for a wager, man."

I made no answer, but continued to walk briskly, listening all the while for the sound of alarm or outcry in the still, clear air. But I heard nothing. There

was no sound but the fall of our footsteps on the road, and the whispering of the leaves in the darkness above us.

We came shortly on a gateway built in the wall with a wooden gate thrown open. It led upon a dark drive or avenue, at the end of which I saw a gleam of light. And here for the first time I heard the sound of voices and laughter. I halted abruptly, and passing through the gateway, went some way up the avenue, walking the while on the turf to drown my footsteps. Then we came to a broad terrace of fine gravel, and here was a dark stone house squarely built with its windows opening low upon the ground. The night-hawks whom I sought were standing on the steps that led to the door, rapping loudly, and calling out with laughter in their voices. I could now see them very plainly, and even the flicker of shining steel where one of them carried his rapier in his hand.

There was no answer to their knocking, and I then saw one of them retire a little way from the door, and survey the house standing in the midst of the broad light that streamed from the windows. He stood here a good while, then he cried out, "The little jade will not open. I will not be baulked. By Saint Eros, we will try the windows."

All this time I stood considering what course I should take. I had no desire to face two resolute swordsmen who had probably more skill with their weapons than myself; for the fellow at my elbow, he was too drunk to give me much anxiety, but I could see that the others were sober enough. While I stood there hesitating, they went up to the window, and I saw them endeavouring to force it open. Then I could hear the loud sound of breaking glass, and a cry of terror from within. At that I think I made an audible exclamation, and threw my cloak from my shoulders. Certainly my companion, who had halted by my side, turned round and looked at me. He fell back a pace or two in astonishment, and drew his rapier from the sheath. He was about to call out,

but I gave him no time for that. With a swift stride I caught him by his collar of Flanders lace, and wrenched his weapon from his hand almost before he knew that it was done. Then I tightened my grasp upon his throat, and flung him headlong into the shrubbery with such force that he lay there motionless. After that I placed the point of his rapier on the ground, and with my foot I broke it in two pieces, throwing the hilt after its owner.

All this took a little time to do, and before it was done one of the two cavaliers had already entered the house, and the other was in the act of passing through the window. The outcry that I had heard had now become shriller and more piercing. There was no time left me to decide what I should do. I had now to throw myself into the arms of chance and trust to some fortunate accident to carry me safely through.

I ran hastily across the gravelled drive, no longer fearing to be heard, for the terrified cries from within rang out in the night with great clearness. When I gained the window, which was not more than three feet from the ground, I halted for a minute and looked into the lighted room. The curtain had been torn down, and lay a mass of silken stuff in the bay. A lamp burned on the table, and two candles on an armoire of black oak at the back of the room. A girl was standing near the door clad in a loose white gown, which was not whiter than her face. Her dark eyes, that looked still darker from the extreme pallor of her face, were filled with terror, and shone with excessive brilliance. Her hands clasped the back of a chair as if for support, but her lips never moved, and she made no sound. Behind her was a much older woman, she whose cries were so shrill and piercing, and altogether an odd and curious figure. Her dress was of the fashion of the last reign as I have heard it described, and two patches of rouge very red and bright stood out like points of light on her white and wasted cheeks. Her wig, with its strange, fantastic curls, fell a little to one side, and left a portion of her head bald and bare.

Her screams had now become intermittent, and finally fell away into a little gurgle of terror. In the near foreground were the two gallants who had entered so unceremoniously. They were both clad in the extremity of fashion and were flushed with wine, for I now saw their faces distinctly where I stood. One of them had taken off his beaver, and when I came up was bowing with a mock courtesy that made my nerves tingle. I saw his lips moving, but for a while I could not hear his words for the outcry of the old lady. But when she had finally subsided into comparative silence as I have said, then I heard distinctly.

"I crave your pardon, Mistress Death, if this ancient lady would but let me speak. God's wounds, I would not fright your gentle heart; but when love cannot enter at the door, egad, it must get in at the window. Your beauty is chaste as the bow of Diana, and cold as the snows of Olympus. We drank the Rose of Oxford till we could not hear the chimes."

He bowed again, but the girl neither moved nor spoke. I thought that her fear had robbed her of all power of speech, for she only kept her eyes on the speaker's face, very wild and fixed.

His companion gave a short, uneasy laugh.

"A cold welcome, Wilmot. The fifty guineas are mine, I think," I heard him say in an audible whisper.

The other did not appear to hear the words, but went on in his cool and studied manner. "I have long worshipped at the shrine of beauty; but now the goddess has become a woman. I worship still, but love you also."

He made a step or two forward. The girl still stood looking at him, the expression of her face never changing. Then she said slowly, "What do you want, Lord Wilmot?"

"Want? One look of welcome, one smile of greeting, one word of gracious tenderness. Give me

that, and I am happy. Behold your slave and victim."

He bowed very low, and then dropped with one knee on the ground in mock homage and regard. Whether it was the wine in his head that made him act thus, I do not know, but for the first time, a little colour came into the girl's face, and she drew herself up with a touch of pride.

"This may be a comedy for you, my lord," she cried, lifting her voice, "but what is it for two defenceless women, who have no power to protect themselves? You should be a gentleman; do not forget that you are a man."

"It is because I am a man that I am here; were I other, I had not troubled you. What man can look on you, the cynosure, the pearl of pearls, the rose of all the garden, and not betray his manhood?"

"Spoken like a book, Harry," cried the other, turning on his heel with a laugh. "I pray you come at once to the last verse of the lyric, and let us make an end."

"My friend grows impatient; but I, your slave and servant, do not move until you bid me rise. Come down, sweet saint, and raise your worshipper."

"You mock me, sir. You—a gentleman, a soldier, and a man of honour! You are but a pitiful coward, to frighten women and play upon their fears. Were I a man you would not be so bold."

"You are more dangerous than fifty men—your eyes a regiment, your lips a battery. I would not terrify you for the Indies and all the East. Not Mars, but Cupid, is the god that brings me here. I love you."

"Love! My father is a gentleman, a servant of the king. If you have no respect for me, a woman, at least—Oh, were he here to see his daughter so insulted and dishonoured!"

"Sir John is an excellent gentleman," cried the lover rising from his knees, "and drunk or sober has curious manners of his own. But fathers are the natural

enemies of lovers. I love you, and upon these tender lips I hereby pledge my faith.'

He made a step forward, and the girl, very white and terrified, fell back toward the door.

"Is there no help?" she cried wildly. I think she was about to fly from the room in her terror, but the elder lady clung to her with her arms round her waist.

"You must put Mother Hubbard to bed, Will, while I console my weeping beauty."

"There are now three to that bargain," I cried, leaping lightly through the window, and bringing down a vase as I came with a great crash. I had thrown aside my cloak and drawn my sword, and never in my life did the blood flow more swiftly in my veins. I had listened with growing indignation, determined not to interfere till that became a duty, but when that moment arrived I was only too eager in the quarrel. The girl's beauty, her tears and distress, and the insolence of her ravisher, all united to put me in a white heat of disdain and passion.

I never saw greater astonishment depicted on any face than I saw on the faces of the two gentlemen who turned round as I called out and leaped through the window. They stood and looked at me with hanging countenances. I think they had come here with a feeling of perfect security and without fear of interruption. Their surprise, therefore, and the suddenness of my appearance gave me a great advantage by which I did not fail to profit. If I had halted I had not perhaps now been writing these memoirs. The first gentleman (he who had been playing the chorus) had not time to put himself on the defensive or even to throw aside the cloak with which he was encumbered. I saw him trying to do that as I leaped upon him. He had been standing only a few feet from the window, and hardly five seconds passed from the time I entered the room till I had reached him. I struck him upon the face with so much force that I sent him headlong beneath the table, where he lay

groaning, and did not trouble me again. But the second had had time to recover from his surprise, and whipped out his rapier with a flourish. I think he did not know what strength I had behind me, or he had not waited for my attack, but had taken the initiative himself. He fell back a little and waited upon me. The two ladies had both drawn close to the door and were perfectly silent, the elder now crossing herself devoutly a thousand times.

A chair stood between myself and my opponent, on which he had thrown his hat. This he kicked with his foot contemptuously to one side.

"A clear field for the lady's bravo," he said, never raising his voice, but speaking with a silken lisp. "Bring in your friends, and I will entertain them all."

"You will first entertain me," I said, "and may find enough to do."

"Pray who are you?"

"A gentleman who has not yet learned to insult a woman."

"H'm—probably the bully, possibly the dupe," cries my lord, and the next moment our swords were crossed. Even then, I wondered at the manner in which the expression upon his face changed at the click of steel as our weapons touched. A moment before he had been cool, contemptuous and cynical; now his brows were knitted, and there was a stern, deliberate look in the eyes that met mine. I could see that he was a very perfect swordsman. His weapon and his arm were one, and both of steel. His eyes never left mine for a moment. His easy pose, his dexterous parries, the swiftness of his movements, told me in a moment that I had met with a master. While I stood before him (so strangely do our thoughts run) I was thankful that my college days were not all spent in logic and divinity. I had learned something in the school of Signor Carracali, and once or twice had pinked my master fairly with the foils. But now it needed all my skill and watch-

fulness. I was touched once in the arm, not having room where I stood, and having the lamp shining full upon my face. Several times I tried to change my position, but my antagonist saw this, and each time he drove me back. I could not enter upon his guard. As I tried and failed, I saw a smile, very faint and shadowy, pass across the mask of his countenance. This maddened me beyond expression. I think after this I began to play wildly, for his smile turned into a mocking laugh.

"You do not practise that thrust in Alsatia," he said lightly. "I will give you three minutes more, and then you march to Hades."

As he spoke, the point of my rapier touched his cheek lightly, and the blood followed the track of my weapon. The look upon his face never altered; his eyes never left mine; his coolness was not shaken. I saw the red stain of blood on his white collar.

"My turn," I cried; "you spoke too soon."

"Two minutes," he answered lightly. "I keep my word. To-morrow Sir John may drink and pray alone."

I knew that he intended to kill me—that I read in his eyes, though his lips were now parted with a pleasant smile. But I had no fear, for I still held my own, and but for the disadvantage of my position, thought that I could have met him on equal terms. In this it was clear that he did not agree with me, for his bearing had grown very careless and confident, though he did not relax in his vigilance, and never gave me a chance.

"One minute more," he cried. "Where would you have me pink you, sir?"

"Where you can," I answered. "We have not finished yet."

"'Tis nearly done. I know that thrust and guard—an old trick. Your time has come."

It may have been mere bravado, but I do not know. He spoke quite seriously. The elder lady set up a great cry at his words, and, though I am not

quite sure, the younger advanced a step or two with her hands clasped on her breast. He set his lips, and pressed me hard. I felt the point of his weapon twice, and the blood followed it. But I did not yield a step; nay, rather I pressed upon him the more briskly, and after a while, with a dark look on his face, he fell back a little, and left his body quite open. I pressed forward, and then, my foot catching upon the carpet, I stumbled and almost fell.

"*Habet!*" he cried.

I saw a quick flash of shining steel pass before my eyes, and I felt the pain as of a scaring-iron upon my shoulder. After that I only remember catching at the floor to save myself, as I thought, from falling into unfathomable depths. Then, with a loud cry ringing in my ears, there followed a great darkness, and I knew nothing more.

CHAPTER X.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

I DO not know how long I lay in this oblivion. For some days certainly I remembered nothing; my mind was completely blank. Then there followed an interval that seemed like years in which forgotten incidents came back in curious and fantastic shapes. My old companions were about my bed; their voices rang in my ears; their hands were placed in mine. Yet I myself was no longer young, but broken with age and infirmity. But one persistent picture chiefly dwelt with me. Once and again I saw Beauchamp Hall in flames, the lambent tongues of fire licking from basement to roof, and from window to window, and in the midst of all this conflagration, Melody Leigh calling on me piteously for help. But I could not stir; my limbs refused to act; I could only call out her name in an agony of despair. After this I grew calmer, and I knew that I lay in a great bed with hangings of green silk, and opposite me a window with shadows moving on the blind. How I had come here, I could not at first think, nor where I was. I was also aware of a moving presence in the room, whose touch was very light, and whose voice was low and musical. I thought the woman kissed me once on the forehead. I could not see her face, but only her eyes, very bright and tender. I knew that this was only another dream, for a little while after, Sir John Death came into the room, and stood looking at me, with a smile on his face and his old song on his lips. But that was now no longer hard and mocking. He stood looking at me for a long time,

and then traversed the room many times, with his hand thrown up in the way I remembered. I tried to speak to him but could not.

After that I remember nothing till I awoke with my mind quite clear. The winter sunshine was bright upon the window, and a bird was singing with a shrill note upon the tree whose shadow I had watched so long. I can yet recall that gay and whistling note. The curtains of the bed in which I lay were worn and faded, and the furniture of the room was very old and antiquated. There was no carpet upon the floor, which was of oak stained quite black. The old lady whom I had seen the night I came to Oxford, was seated hard by my bed. If I thought her a curious figure when I first saw her, she was certainly still more curious and fantastic in the daylight. Her wig of long, dark curls was now properly adjusted, and fell about a face thickly lined with wrinkles and painted in all the hues of blushing youth. She wore a high cap of bright colours, and a dress of some brocaded stuff, coming low down in the waist, and so short that it showed her stockings and a pair of red-heeled shoes. An ebony stick with a silver handle richly carved lay across her knees.

When I awoke her head was turned from me, and I watched her for a long time without making any sound. Then I moved uneasily, and she turned round, regarding me with her keen eyes that had a bird-like glitter in them.

"Where am I?" I said, raising myself a little on the pillow.

"In my house, sir," she answered, rising from her chair and walking to the bedside. "I am Lady Penelope Askew; you are with friends who value you."

"How long have I been here?"

"Some days."

"Days? I had thought it weeks."

A smile wrinkled her face like parchment. "Yes, yes; you have been ill—an illness common in these

times—but you are better now. You will presently remember everything.”

“I have forgotten nothing,” I answered. “Is the girl safe?”

“The girl, sir, is my niece,” she said, drawing herself up a little, “and herself will thank you for your services. My Lord Wilmot’s careless jest—”

“A strange jest,” I said, looking at her in wonder. “If that was jest I wonder what his earnest is?”

“Was unpardonable,” she went on, without heeding my interruption. “I can never forgive him. He presumed too much on my retirement. I keep no state, I see no company, but he should, at least, respect my birth and quality. My brother will demand satisfaction from my lord when he returns. When I was of the queen’s household—”

She had seated herself by my bedside again, and went on in a little rippling flow, nodding her head and shaking her curls. I closed my eyes and permitted her to talk, only at times taking up the sequence of her speech, and at length ceasing to understand altogether. She talked of the splendour of Whitehall, and the greatness of her family, now under some temporary eclipse of fortune. She detailed a long family history with great minuteness, and ended with a little lament over its departed greatness. There was no pause in the narrative; no break in the rippling flow. I was quite bewildered, and lay wondering when she meant to come to an end. But no sooner had she exhausted one branch of the fruitful stem, than another took its place with great luxuriance of detail.

I suddenly started up and cried out with a suddenness and energy that startled her.

“Days, you said? How many days have I been lying here?”

She looked at me greatly astonished.

“Sir?”

“How long have I been here?”

"A fortnight upon Friday. That must not trouble you; you are very welcome."

"Then it is all over and done," I cried. "Has news come from Beauchamp Hall? The king—"

She only shook her head in answer, and I saw from the expression on her face that she knew nothing. She thought that I was again wandering in my mind, for she rose and poured out a draught that she held to my lips. I was too weak to resist, and swallowed it without a murmur.

I had hardly done this when the door opened softly and her niece came into the room—the vision with the low voice and sweet eyes that had been in my dreams. She was dressed in a loose gown of some dove-coloured stuff, with a spray of autumn leaves in her dark hair, that formed a rich setting to her pale face. Looking at her through my half-closed eyes, I murmured *Dea certe*. There was, indeed, something Olympian in her carriage, though full of grace and sweetness. On the night I had first seen her I had hardly regarded her at all, but now her beauty burst upon me as a surprise.

She came up to the bed and looked at me for a time. "He is sleeping," she said. "I thought I heard your voice."

"He was awake a moment since," the elder lady answered, "and talked quite sensibly. My dear," she continued in a whisper, "he hath a ploughman's manner, and I hardly think he is a gentleman. If I were certain—"

"And if he were, you forget what he did for us. My father—"

"Pooh, your father's geese are all swans, child, and royal birds. I think I know a gentleman. He treated me with great disrespect, and dared to interrupt me to my face. Our fortunes are not sunk so low that I should bear indignity with patience."

The girl said something in a very low tone that I did not hear.

"Fancies, forsooth!" the old lady retorted, rising

from her chair, and going toward the door with the aid of her stick. "You forget your place, minx, and the respect that is due to rank and—and age, and all that I have done for your father and yourself."

"I did not mean—"

"I know your meaning; it was clear to read. Admiration has quite turned your head, and now you think you have found another—"

"You will awaken him," cried the girl, looking at me in alarm. "He is growing restless now."

"I have already forgotten myself too far, and shall not stoop again. Remember that you are my niece, and do not forget yourself."

The strange old lady shook her curls in a tempestuous fashion, that I thought then, and know now, to have been a habit with her, for her uncertainty of temper was more than feminine. Then she gave me one quick glance of irate pride, and quitted the room. I did not know how I had offended her susceptibilities, and I was then too weak to care. Therefore I lay still, with my eyes almost closed, watching as in a dream the girl moving through the room, and once and again pausing to look at me in her task. Then she came up to the bedside, thinking that I slept, and laid her hand upon mine very gently. I did not raise my eyes to her face, but kept them fixed upon the small white hand that lay upon mine. I saw that it trembled a little. She stood there for a good while, never stirring, and once I heard her draw a deep breath. Then she bent down and kissed me on the forehead. She did this so modestly and gently, that at the time I felt no surprise at all. After that she smoothed my pillow with such deftness as is only found in the hands of a woman, and was about to leave the room when I opened my eyes and looked at her. A deep flush dyed her forehead and cheeks a rosy red; but a moment after she recovered her natural serenity.

"Stay," I cried, "I think I have been dreaming."

"I hope they have been pleasant dreams."

"I dreamt that I had lain here a week or more, and that night and day a spirit of peace assuaged my pain and ministered to all my thoughtless wants. She never rested ; she never wearied. She bore with all my sick and fevered fancies. She brought me back to life again. And now I see the vision face to face. I am too poor in speech to give you thanks."

"You are dreaming still," she answered with a smile. "You must sleep again."

"I dream no longer," I said, seizing her hand and raising it to my lips.

She drew it away quickly, and retired a pace or two.

"If I have done anything for you," she answered quietly, "I had done as much for a stranger to whom I owed nothing. But to you perhaps I owe everything—my life, honour, and good name. You were my deliverer and preserver, for whom I shall pray as long as I live. I shall never be able to repay you. I blush to think of it, and I have my dreams also."

"Then we will neither of us dream again," I said, seeing her meaning in her face rather than in her words. "We will keep the beaten road of real life. You did not know I had a message for you, Mistress Death?"

"A message that nearly cost your life. My father has told me."

"How?" I cried, starting up, and looking at her in astonishment. "Has Colonel Death returned? I did not know that."

"Nearly a week ago, but only for an hour or two. He saw you here, but you failed to know him. You were quite unconscious."

I remembered the figure in my dream that was then no dream. What I had seen was flesh and blood.

"I must see him," I cried, "I cannot rest till I have seen him. Perhaps you heard—"

"Nothing," she answered. "I know nothing but the broken story that you repeated again and again in your delirium. We have few friends ; we learn no

news, and I think my father, who knows everything, did not himself know else I should have learned."

"And I lie bound here hand and foot!" I cried bitterly.

Then for the first time the recollection of my interview with the king flashed upon my mind, and of my appointment for the morrow, which I had failed to keep. The girl saw the look of despair upon my face; I sank back quite overcome by the vehemence of my feelings. I was distracted beyond measure; my trust was broken in my hands; the king must think me faithless; my friends—I dare not trust myself to my thoughts, or they had carried me back again into the darkness of deliquium. I could only lie and look blankly at the sweet face that bent over me, and find comfort in the tender sympathy that was written there.

The two or three days that followed were among the darkest and most wretched of my life. I was torn with a thousand emotions and pursued by a thousand fears. I hardly escaped from them when I slept, and when I awakened they were already upon my track. I knew not what had happened, and all conjecture rendered me the more unhappy. Here I was completely shut out from the world; I had no means of communicating with it; I had no source through which to learn its tidings. At the very crisis of my fortune, when the field of action was opening out with larger prospect and richer hope, I had disappeared and was lost to all my friends. I knew that fate had cast me here, but that did not render my despair the less poignant; nay, rather, I railed at Fortune, and cried out on Providence.

In all my madness I had a sweet and patient listener in Mary Death. To her I poured out the story of my hopes and fears, for I think my mind had lost its strength, and she never wearied of the thrice-told tale. I learned to look to her, as men will learn, for sympathy and consolation; nay, even I fear I unlocked my heart in one quiet hour of confidence, and

told her the story of my love. I had grown selfish in misfortune ; I thought of nothing save myself. She never wearied or grew impatient. Her serenity and sweetness were the one ray of brightness in the gloom surrounding me.

She hardly spoke of herself at all, and then only at my instance. She knew nothing of the world of men and women, and had spent her life in cloistered solitude. I think Sir John had been a great prodigal in his youth, and had squandered his fortune, and that to him his family had owed its decadence in a large degree. But the father had no fault or flaw in his daughter's eyes. I marvelled to see how her eyes lighted and her face cleared, when she spoke of his virtues ; his very vices were transmuted in the alembic of her affections into shining graces. He had fought like Bayard ; he had travelled like Marco Polo ; and all this was spoken with a sober judgment that her solitary life had ripened early.

Lady Penelope paid me an occasional visit, very ceremonious and reserved. I think Sir John had enlightened her in regard to my condition and fortune, but she still treated me with a very distant courtesy that never approached to friendliness. I had unconsciously wounded her *amour propre*, and she had been unable to forgive me. In all her visits there was the same desire to hide the meanness of her present state with the shadowy greatness and splendour of the past. I listened with the best grace that I could muster to her account of ancient ceremonies, and the history of forgotten dignities ; I listened and dared not smile. Indeed, I could see she was so much in earnest, and so desirous of my admiration, that I indulged her when I would have had her elsewhere.

I remained confined to my room for nearly a fortnight longer, growing stronger, indeed, and now able to move painfully through the chamber. The physician who had bled and physicked me had now left me to the restoring power of nature, and every day saw an increase in my strength, and a growing impatience to

return to the world I had so unceremoniously quitted.

One afternoon I was seated alone in the chamber, looking out on the forlorn pleasance, and quite filled with disconsolate thoughts, when I suddenly heard a brisk foot upon the stair, and a voice humming a merry tune. I recognised it in an instant. Almost before I had turned round, Sir John Death had thrust open my door, and advanced to meet me with outstretched hands.

"And doth the great Achilles shun the fray?" he cried in his loud, boisterous voice, and his bold eyes dancing with laughter. "Has he grown to love the distaff, and fear to wear the sword? Pooh! what man would give a tester for a scratch of Wilmot's bodkin? I have come to put you on your feet, and blow the dusty cobwebs from your brain. I bring you air and light—"

"And news!" I cried. "For God's sake let me hear the news!"

"The news will keep, brave lad," he answered in the same tone of unrestrained gaiety, "until my greeting has been finished. You are pale as a lover and thin as a poet, and your clothes hang like a week's washing. You are callow still, but by-and-bye the times will harden you. You must fatten; you must thrive. These are the days of brawn and muscle. But, faith, I am glad to see you perpendicular again."

I confess I thought this a strange greeting after all that I had done, and felt inclined to resent his easy humour. But any change was welcome, and I repressed my feeling of annoyance.

"The last time you were here I was low enough," I answered.

"That I was here! Then they told you; I had not thought you knew. Confound these women's tongues—they are like bells of eternity. I saw you for an instant, and you looked like Cheops on the banks of Nilus—embalmed a thousand years."

"I saw you in the room," I answered. "I thought I dreamt."

He looked at me, suddenly sobered, with a broad stare, and, I thought, waited for me to speak. But I remained silent.

"Pshaw! dreams, fancies," he cried. "I was here but a moment and post to Abingdon. Mr. Duncombe," he went on in an altered manner, "I would have you to remember you have made one friend, a poor one, but firm and fast. I think that I have lost faith in all the world—man, heaven, hell, myself—but John Death has one spot in his heart that is not all stone. I have nothing left but my little girl; with both hands I have flung away all else, but I treasure her. You saved her from a villain—curse him! we shall yet cry quits—and I will never forget it."

He seized both my hands and pressed them so tightly in his own that I could almost have cried out with the pain of it. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice was broken with emotion. The transition from wild and reckless mirth had taken place in a moment, yet I could hardly doubt his sincerity.

"I could have done no less," I answered.

"Or more. I learnt your mettle on the road to Oxford when a hair's-breadth more— Pooh! I am a whining schoolboy, and can only blubber forth my thanks. I will not say another word, for I cannot say enough. 'Fore God, when I think of it, I grow as thirsty as Sahara. I never drink at home, or I would crack a bottle willingly."

"Then think no more of it," I said, "but, good or evil, let me hear the news you bring. I am as a man famished."

I read it all in his face in an instant. He gave me one curious look, and seated himself on the chair beside me, crossing his legs and throwing his hat on the window-seat.

"It is a long story," he said slowly, "and runs now like an old news-letter. You have not forgotten that

I was all against it, but was elbowed to the wall and forced to cry mum. War is not a game of tennis to be played by country gentlemen for trifling stakes on an afternoon. I knew the poor old gentleman—and, Heaven help him! I never met a braver—had let his courage play the devil with his wits. The young fools cried 'Amen,' and thought with thirty serving men and threescore rusty muskets they could hold the old house against the world. Gainsford, I think, was caught by the *beaux yeux* (you know my meaning) and Percival Leigh is blind with pride and vanity. It all fell out to my conjecture—the eyes of prophecy had not seen it clearer. Up came Cromwell in the morning with a falconet or two, got heaven knows where, and a regiment of fighting saints. The guns had scarcely barked than the lackeys threw down their arms and called out lustily for quarter. Not one fired a shot, but huddled like a flock of sheep in rainy weather. A door had been left open in the confusion, and almost before they could cry out, the scarlet coats had laid them by the heels and bound them neck and crop. But Sir Austin (God rest his gallant soul) was not beaten yet. He had shut his daughter and the maids in the tower for safety; the one wise thing he did, had he rested there. The old paladin made for this with his half-dozen witless youngsters, and there held the stone staircase for an hour. An English gentleman can fight when his blood is up, and they fought hard, but were driven up step by step, till Sir Austin reached the door last and stood with his sword in his hand like a royal stag at bay. I am told they would have spared his life for the sake of his grey hairs, but he would not yield a foot. And he died there calling out, 'God save the king!' and went to his account like a loyal gentleman."

"Dead!" I cried.

"Run through the body with a clean thrust, and his daughter catching her father as he fell. The king has lost a good subject."

"And I a faithful friend. There was nothing done to help them?"

"Ay, you rode to Oxford, and the king listened to your pitiful tale, and it ended there, as I thought it would. The saints have all the wit and wisdom, and can beat us at our own weapons. I will turn saint myself and sanctify my thirst."

"Is that the whole tale?" I said, hardly daring to inquire further.

"I have given you the four corners of my narrative, and have little more to tell. Cromwell did not press them hard nor use the two-handed sword unduly. I think the money was a welcome gift and salved his tender conscience. There were some terms of compromise, but Leigh and the *beaux yeux* are now in Oxford for a week or more, and I hear the funeral baked meats—"

"How?" I cried.

"A husband may prove a poor substitute for an excellent father, but I have seen women content to make the exchange. It is a trick they have. At any rate, a living husband is better than—"

"For God's sake," I cried, rising to my feet, "spare me this trifling, for I will not have it, and tell me plainly what you mean. I will have no jest here."

"*Festina lente*," he answered with his mocking smile. "Marriage is no comedy. I but give you the gossip as I heard it, and do not answer for its truth. They say my Lord Gainsford will console the lady for her recent loss, and that she is not unwilling. There is nothing wonderful in this. The like is happening every day. I think you had a fancy—"

"You presume too far, sir," I cried. "The lady has a right to please herself; and I am a dangerous subject for a jest."

"I thought the gossip might have interest for you," he answered carelessly. "It rang with other tavern charges, and there I caught the clink of it."

He never ceased mocking and laughing, but I hardly heard a word he said. In every forecast I had

made, and they were dark and gloomy enough, I had not foreseen the great battalion of misfortunes that now encompassed me. I knew the fate of Beauchamp Hall was sealed—I had not dared to hope it would be otherwise. But the news of Sir Austin's death (so fitting with his blameless life) quite stunned me. I had never dreamed of that. And the second stroke—this moment I cast the suggestion from me as a baseless falsehood, and the next I felt my mistress was, indeed, for ever lost to me. She had been in Oxford for a week—my old playmate and loving friend—and must have heard that I was lying here wounded and alone. And yet I had received neither visit nor kindly message—not a sign of greeting, not a word of sympathy. I could not understand the mystery. Her token lay upon my bosom even now, and gave the lie to all my doubts and fears. And so I rose toward hope, and stumbled toward despair, while Sir John sat scoffing at the world and laughing with a wicked wit at all mankind. But I never heeded.

CHAPTER XI.

A FOUL STROKE.

My wound healed slowly, and I remained a prisoner for weeks. All this time Sir John Death was my only means of communication with the outside world, and him I had long since come to regard as a doubtful medium. He laughed and lied, and when his falsehood was discovered, he lied and laughed again. He did this with such an air of good-humoured bravado that I ceased to be seriously angry, and even began to entertain a sort of friendship for him. There was in his better moments a wild contagion in his mirth; he had at times a subtle charm of manner and a frolic sprightliness that lighted up his speech. In addition to this, I knew that he had conceived an affection for myself which he displayed in a thousand ways.

He spent many hours in setting forth, for my entertainment, the story of his life, and surely Ulysses himself had not a stranger or more varied. He had carried arms against the Turk, and even hinted that he had embraced the Moslem faith himself; he had served the Prince Cardinal; had had a venture to the Barbadoes, and had nearly lost his life in the Virginias with such portion of his fortune as was left. But he never spoke of these things in his daughter's presence. There he was quite another man, and put on the virtues of a gentleman, and the manners of a courtier. I marvelled to see the regard with which he treated her; no adoring lover had been more tender, no subject more filled with reverence. And upon her part, she met his tenderness with equal tenderness,

and knew him only as he seemed. So far as he was concerned, I do not think there was any hypocrisy in this, but that his love naturally sought to play a part fitting its lofty character. But, indeed, I cannot explain it at all, nor could I while I watched him whose lips were still foul with his recent speech, playing the part of Galahad or Percival. He was still an enigma that I could not solve.

During all this time I had no visitors, and learned nothing of what I was desirous beyond all things to learn. I could not understand why my friends should leave me quite solitary, and without notice or inquiry, and my ailing fancy formed a hundred reasons. The rumour that Sir John had brought me had seemed too wild and fanciful to credit, but this silence and neglect gave it strength and force. At first it had seemed to me treasonable to entertain the thought, but as time went on, it grew a haunting passion.

Unable to bear the suspense longer, I wrote a letter to Sir Percival, in which I implored him by our ancient friendship to visit me without delay. Sir John assured me that he delivered my letter with his own hands, but I received no answer. This was so foreign to the character of my old friend, that I began to examine my own conduct to find some cause for offence there. But I could find nothing. I think my anxiety of mind prevented my wounds from healing rapidly, and it was already the early spring before I was able to move out of doors.

My servant, John Lockwood, had come up from Duncombe with a store of linen and other articles of which I stood in need. He had great anxiety that I should return home as soon as I could travel, looking upon the Moat House as a great prison, and upon Colonel Death as a vigilant gaoler. He could give me little more information regarding the capture of Beauchamp Hall than I had already learned, but he hinted in his vague and mysterious way that there had been treachery at work, though where he did not know. This was the popular report; but knowing

Lockwood's way, I gave it little further thought. Indeed, my thoughts were all of the future, and of my friends' ingratitude and faithlessness. I had tried to serve them—fruitlessly, indeed, but sincerely—and when I had failed, I had been forgotten. I rang the changes upon this theme a thousand times, and each time more bitterly and with growing indignation. It was now for the first time that I thought of the sweetness and beauty of Mary Death, and strove to forget my faithless love in a new and tender passion. I was young, and smarting from a recent blow, and longed for sympathy. But she refused to listen to my speeches, and turned them aside with a light and playful humour.

"You would have my ears betray my eyes," she had said. "Your face is false to me, and your tongue is false to Mistress Leigh. You love her still, and in your heart you know I speak the truth. You would have me piece your broken heart, and when 'tis whole 'twill beat for her and her alone. The dove that pecks my fingers comes back to nestle in my bosom by and by. You have told me far too much; now tell me nothing more."

Indeed I knew she spoke the truth. My heart was still with my old playmate, and though the thought of her faithlessness drove me into wild and despairing moods, in the end I found myself brooding upon tender memories and sweet regrets.

For some time I took the air in the enclosed garden surrounding the Moat House; the healing vigour of the early spring that throbbed to life in leaf and bud brought back my failing strength, and dispelled my sombre fancies. Lady Penelope (*laudator temporis acti*) at times would take my arm, and walk with me up and down the pleasance, while John Lockwood followed slowly behind, being now my lady's chamberlain, nor much in love with his task; or Sir John, the ladies having retired, would smoke his pipe with me in the arbour, when the weather was warm enough, and the sunshine lay fair on the

sheltered corner. But chiefly Mistress Mary was my companion, and in her society I forgot the tedium of my captivity.

I was now, indeed, almost a member of this curious family, and certainly had received many tokens of kindness from them. But as I grew now quite strong I determined to return to the Wheatsheaf, although Sir John would not hear of it at first. But I was firm and at length prevailed. John Lockwood was much delighted at the change in his own way, and eloquently expressed his satisfaction.

"The old house is like a mouldy cheese, sir, and full of maggots. They are in the air, in the food, and more especially in the beer; but of all the maggots the old lady was the one I loved least. I hope I am a man and a good Christian, but I could not stand it when she gave me her wig to curl."

For my own part, I must own that I left the Moat House with regret. I had received much kindness, and had become accustomed to its ways. But I felt that to remain longer was to impose upon a hospitality that lack of means had straitened, and I did not dare to offer any recompense. Nor was there any excuse to remain longer; but for a little stiffness I was as well as ever.

On the night on which I returned to the Wheatsheaf, John Lockwood, who was ordinarily a sober fellow, stayed out late and came home drunk. He had, he said, been drinking a glass of ale with some old friends, and that one led to another, and the news had made him thirsty. He was in a loquacious mood, and I silently permitted him to ramble on.

"You remember Dennison, sir, the little wire-haired, wizened fellow who had a quarrel with the old squire, and went to Beauchamp to the stables? He has come here with Sir Percival, and is swollen with his new dignity beyond all knowing. But I left him flat enough, and put him to bed with his boots on. They tell wonderful tales about yourself, sir; the

Lord forgive them for their leasing! They say that you have run away with Sir John's daughter, and that you and he sold Beauchamp Hall between you for something more than a ballad. They talked about a door left open, but by that time the bees were swarming in my head, and I couldn't carry home the story. I told them they lied in their throats; and for Sir John's daughter—you had run no farther than Oxford, though the lady and yourself are keen to make a match of it."

"You rascal," I cried, "how dared you say that?"

"I knew the lady had a fortune, for Sir John told me as much himself, and I would not let Dennison have it all his own way. Mistress Leigh is to marry the gentleman who came up in their company, and I thought your marriage but a fair set-off for the honour of the family."

Poor John, who was as honest a fellow as ever loved good ale, went to bed that night more quickly than he ever did in his life, while his master walked his room the whole night through, wrought almost to a fever by a lackey's idle gossip.

"What ground," I cried, "is there for all this; what evil tongue, what lying slander, has turned my friends, and set them all against me?" I could form no conjecture, but I went to bed determined that another day should not pass before I had plucked the heart out of the mystery and set my doubts at rest. I did not succeed in this, but I learned enough to know that in some way I had been wronged beyond all my fears. With the clue in my hands, it seems to me now easy to read, but then I had nothing to guide me, and I blundered blindly.

In the morning I made up my mind to call upon Mr. Ashburnham, who had received me kindly, and who was the only gentleman about the court that I knew even by sight.

At first he received me with some measure of coldness, but by degrees he lost his reserve, and treated me more openly.

"You are right, Mr. Duncombe," he said. "I learnt the reason why you failed to keep your engagement with the king. I speak plainly. A woman came between you and your duty, and like a fool you threw away a great chance for the sake of a wench. I heard the tale from Wilmot; he had thought you dead."

"You do not know the truth," I said, bewildered at this new complexion that was put upon my adventure. "I did not seek this; it was thrust upon me, and I could not honourably do otherwise."

"There is no honour before the king's honour," he answered gravely. "A drunken quarrel with Wilmot over a *bonne fortune*—"

"Tis slander, sir. The lady is as pure—"

He smiled dubiously.

"She has nursed me for six weeks: I have seen her goodness. For heaven's sake hear my story, then you may condemn me if you will. I seem to have lost both my friends and my good name, and yet I do not know how. I strove to serve the king; I had no other thought. I am sure my Lord Wilmot will do me justice, and Colonel Death will bear him out."

"Your witnesses will hardly help you much. I say no more than that."

"Then hear me. My word has gone unquestioned until now."

"Willingly. I answered for your faith before, and would not judge you harshly, but the king is much offended. He has no love for night adventurers."

I do not quite know what I said, but I told the whole tale from the moment of leaving the king's presence until the hour I quitted the Moat House. I know my passion gave me language, and I saw as I went on, that I carried conviction to my hearer's mind; for I was burning with a sense of injustice too strong to be restrained. I was conscious of no fault; nay, rather my one object had been to discharge my duty faithfully, and all that I had done had been misrepresented and turned to my disadvantage.

When I had finished, Mr. Ashburnham went over to a cabinet from which he took a paper. This he tore into a hundred pieces and flung into the fire.

"I believe every word you have said, Mr. Duncombe, and I myself will tell your story to the king. He will be glad to hear your version; he esteemed you highly, and my noble master loves his friends. But in the future you must watch your steps more carefully—you have a secret enemy."

"An enemy?"

"These fragments are my answer to his calumny. He stabbed you in the dark, and did not venture to disclose his name. I myself desire neither proof nor witness, but I will wring the truth from Wilmot, and the king shall hear the evidence."

"I did not think I had an enemy in Oxford," I said. "I wish you had let me see the paper."

"It would have told you nothing. The liar loves a secret blow. These charges were too wild for credence, and having set the quarrel with Wilmot right, I hold you quite absolved. These charges—pshaw, the brewer Cromwell uses other tools."

"Cromwell!" I cried aghast.

"You look astonished, as you may. This secret slanderer says you are a spy, and hold a pass from Cromwell. I writ him down a liar when I read his missive. I think I know the ring of honest coin. Now look you, Mr. Duncombe, an older man may say a friendly word without offence. To choose one's friends is half the art of life. Your friends in Oxford will not help you much."

"I have no friends save Colonel Death," I answered. "All the rest—"

"Sir John carries a long sword, and men are therefore chary to talk of him. But in some sort I am interested in you, and I will speak more plainly than I am accustomed. Sir John's friends have all paid for their acquaintanceship—one in this way, one in that. No man has a worse reputation, and none deserves it better."

"His daughter and himself have done me much kindness."

"I do not doubt that. You are a sportsman ; have you ever captured duck in winter? Then you know the way the fools are taken. I am told the girl is beautiful."

"And I will answer for her goodness," I said. "I think you wrong them both."

"Sir John's history has yet to be written," he answered smiling, "and will contain some curious chapters. There are men who, like the mole, live underground, and he is one of them. I esteem you none the worse because you stand by those you think your friends. But take warning and let Sir John know none of your secrets."

"I have no secrets that all the world may not know."

"Happy youth! But the time may come. You would serve his majesty."

"Sir," I answered, "I thought once I was doing the king a service at the peril of my life. I had no thought but his honour ; I had a single purpose to serve him. This only to find myself cast out and suspected. I can do nothing."

"I would not sing your praises in your own ear. The young horse that fails at his first fence thinks he will never jump again. His majesty will hear to-night the truth about your midnight ramble, and it will be your own fault, not mine, if you do not climb to favour. Some day I may tell you my own story, and how a chance acquaintance like our own brought me some fortune. You will be present at the levée in the morning? And now, only another word—take care of Sir John Death."

He rose and held out his hand with evident friendliness, and then courteously bowed me out.

I knew that I had made one friend, but you can well imagine the feelings with which I left him. I was entirely in a maze ; I was bewildered and confounded. I was not conscious that I had any enemy,

yet I could not doubt that the deadliest hostility had been at work to destroy my credit and undermine my fortune. What hand had struck the blow; what motive had prompted it? I had been standing blind-fold on the edge of a precipice, and had hardly yet recovered my way to safety, for I knew not where the next blow would be struck nor by whom.

I went into the garden by Merton College, and sat down there upon a seat to think the matter out. While I sat there a thought suddenly flashed upon me—the pass from Cromwell. I had not seen it since the morning it was written, and I thrust my hand into the pocket within my breast.

It was gone.

The other papers that I carried were quite intact, but this had disappeared.

My fingers trembled as I continued my search, for I knew what meaning might be placed upon this innocent paper, and felt that my enemy would not scruple to use it. It was all to no purpose. At last I gave over my search and sat looking blankly before me. This was no accident. The hand that had basely written the slander had first armed itself with the proof. But how and who? Not for one moment did I think to accuse Mary Death, and Sir John had not the opportunity if he had the will. But I put him aside in a moment. I knew that I had rendered him a signal service. Notwithstanding Mr. Ashburnham's warning, I knew that his gratitude was profound, and that he entertained a warm affection for myself. In this he could have no cause to serve, no gain to win. Whatever his character, whatever his concealed views, he had treated me only as a chartered friend who might make unlimited demands upon his goodwill. I could answer for Lockwood's fidelity. There was only my Lord Wilmot left. It might be in a moment of mad frolic he had sought to drive my poor bark ashore, and so wreck my fortunes for a whim. He might have found the paper when I fell, and partly in revenge,

partly in caprice, have played me this foul stroke. And yet it was not possible.

It was all dark and incomprehensible ; I could make nothing of it. But I was like to lose more than my reputation and the king's favour. I knew now that it was no mere accident that had alienated the affection of my friends—the friendship of my old companion, the heart of my mistress. I was now able to account for the neglect with which I had been treated, and as I sat in the frosty sunlight in that pleasant garden, I made a hasty resolve to track the traitor home, and mete out his punishment for the misery he had caused me.

But the cup of my misfortune was not yet full. I had still one further blow to suffer which cut, perhaps, more deeply than the rest. Even yet I remember the day—the twenty-second of February—as a day of humiliation. I still keep it as one of the dark days in my private calendar. It must be borne in mind that I still knew little of the world ; I was yet barely on its threshold, and the riper judgment of manhood has not yet restrained and tempered the hot feelings of my youth.

On this day there were many ladies and gentlemen in the garden, for the air was mild with the first sweet breath of spring. Absorbed in my gloomy thoughts, I had not noticed them ; they came and went, but I had no eyes for the crowd. I sat retired, wrapped up in my own fears and hopes. Suddenly I rose to my feet ; I could not help it. For there, a little way from me, was my dear mistress of whom I was now thinking, and whom I was beginning to look upon as for ever lost to me. She was clad in deep mourning, and leaned upon her brother's arm, as she came slowly down the path. Neither of them had seen me, and I watched her with my heart beating loudly in my breast. A little while before I had been smarting under a bitter sense of wrong : now ten thousand memories were awakened within me, and my love burned as brightly as ever. The old trick of carrying

her head, the very movement of her hand, recalled me to myself.

In a moment I made up my mind. I determined to put an end to this misunderstanding, and know, at least, the fault with which I had been charged. My pride restrained me for a brief instant. Then I advanced toward them, and met them face to face. Melody was the first to see me, and I noticed the start and the sudden flush that mantled her face. As I raised my beaver, her brother turned and looked at me, but there was no answering look of recognition in his eyes. He surveyed me coldly like one he did not know, and I thought there was a shadowy smile upon his lips. But I was not to be driven from my purpose by cold looks or sneers, for I thought that this might be my last throw for happiness.

"What have I done or said?" I cried. "There was a time when we were friends."

I spoke very quietly, looking first at the one, and then at the other, and all the time I stood so in front of them that they could not pass. I think Melody was about to speak, but Sir Percival answered shortly—

"I do not know you, sir."

"There was a time when you knew Thomas Duncombe," I said.

"Thomas Duncombe is dead and buried. You are an impostor. He was my friend; I thought I knew him. He is dead."

"You lose your old friends easily," I cried bitterly. "Mistress Melody, have you also lost your old friend?"

"This lady is my sister and under my charge. This is a public place; we cannot quarrel here. Be good enough therefore to stand aside and let us pass."

"I had borne so much," I answered, "from no other person in the world. The fault is not with me. If any slanderer—"

"There is no need for words, sir; I hoped we should not meet again. For reasons that I need not mention,

till now I have held my hand and spared you. I may not always keep the past in memory."

"Is this then the last word?" I said, standing aside with my beaver still held in my hand, and looking at Melody, who did not raise her eyes but kept them fixed upon the ground.

"I hope I may not write the next more legibly," he answered with grave meaning.

He bowed with frigid courtesy, and left me standing there filled with amazement and indignation. I had not been able to say a word in my own justification; I had learned nothing; only the breach between myself and my friends seemed to have grown wider and more difficult to close. I had cast aside the pride that had prompted me to silence, and I had made nothing by my friendly advances. I determined that I should not again undergo such humiliation when I was conscious of no fault, and I cried to myself again and again that my mistress had never loved me or she had not cast me off without a word.

CHAPTER XII.

AN INVITATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

I DID not neglect the invitation which Mr. Ashburnham had given me with so much good-will, and upon the following day I presented myself at the king's reception with some doubts, but still relying upon my new friend's promises. Being new to court, I was astonished at the splendour that surrounded me. I have been told the brilliance of Oxford was but a poor reflection of the glories of Whitehall, but to a simple country gentleman the scene was very striking. No man would have judged that the court and king were menaced with impending ruin ; whispered jests, stifled laughter, smiles, bows, and compliments suited with the rich silk and stones of price that met my eyes on every side. But for myself, I saw another picture beyond all this—the blood-red harvest of war, and the iron reapers who were even now gathering the stricken fields.

The king had not yet entered the chamber. I stood alone and retired, altogether a stranger. I was ill at ease, and quite out of harmony with the careless gaiety that broke out in smile and jest. A cloud lay upon my mind that I could not dispel ; a settled gloom had fallen upon my spirits ; the future seemed entirely dark and uncertain. I could have borne to live without the favour of the king, but I could not bear to think that I stood accused of treachery, and was the object of suspicion. I hoped for no advancement, I sought for no preferment ; but I was ambitious to keep my honour untarnished, and my good name free from spot or stain. Until I had traced

home the falsehood that menaced me with ruin and dishonour, I had preferred to live privately, but to do this now was to give my secret enemy another advantage.

I think now my condition of mind was very natural. It seemed to me that every eye lighted upon me with indifference and suspicion ; that everyone knew my secret. The egotism of youth gave importance to my petty drama, and while I stood unnoticed and alone, I thought I was the subject of a hundred evil tongues.

Therefore I stood bitterly apart, a spectator rather than a part of the pageant. Here were many persons of note whom I came to know afterwards, and some whose faces I knew now. The newly made Earl of Litchfield stood by the window laughing gaily with my Lord Arundel whose solemn features were gathered into a frosty smile. Harry Killigrew had found a new jest, and shook his love locks as he whispered it in the episcopal ears of my Lord of Chester. The Prince Palatine stood in the centre of a group of gentlemen, and I could catch fragments of his free, careless speech where I stood, for he spoke loudly and without restraint. I remember wondering to hear him discuss these matters of importance in the presence of so many listeners, but he was ever of those who cut the meshes of diplomacy with the sword's edge, and believe less in secrets of state than a rousing cavalry charge.

While I stood here, my Lord Wilmot passed me with his hand resting familiarly on the shoulder of another gentleman. Though his eyes did not meet mine, I saw that he knew me, for I noticed the start of recognition which immediately gave place to his usual air of well-bred indifference. He passed me slowly, and I lost sight of him in the crowd. I had not expected any recognition from him, and I attributed to him much of the misfortune that had befallen me. I did not know whether he cherished any ill-will toward me, but a minute or two afterwards he set my doubts

at rest. A hand touched my shoulder lightly, and I turned round to find him standing at my elbow. He wore a pleasant smile, and bowed courteously.

"You are a stranger here, Mr. Duncombe?"

"I know no one," I answered.

"Our introduction was not a happy prologue, but if you will let it pass I would do you the office of a friend."

"I nourish no ill-will," I said, still on my guard. "I hope we are not enemies."

"You have a pretty skill with your weapon. But for that unlucky accident 'tis hard to say you had not spitted me. I trust you are quite recovered."

"I am none the worse."

"I am delighted to hear that. I saw you did not know the parry, and I thought 'twould finish you. You are a gentleman, and I do not apologise for that, but another apology I do owe you. I had thought you one of Sir John's curious friends. I have since learned you were a stranger, and there was a time—a long time since—when I had done as you did. Perhaps 'twas I deserved the punishment."

"Perhaps."

"I used to think every goose a swan myself."

"I beg your pardon, my lord."

"Nay, I mean nothing offensive; I would to God I could think so still! But I did you an injury, and would set it right. Mine was but a drunken frolic. I told the story afterwards, and set you down for what I thought you were—the lady's friend. The tale had legs, and I have since tried to overtake it. I did not know you had come to Oxford on important business, and ours was only an affair of chance. I am profoundly sorry."

"I have had reason to regret your mistake, my lord."

"I regret that also. But you must admit that my mistake was natural."

"I cannot see that."

He smiled drily.

"His majesty thought so, too. He has a lenient eye for no man's failings but his own. I think Ashburnham put him on the scent, and he clapt me in the confessional for an hour. I cried *mea culpa*, and set you forth a perfect Saint George of Capadocia. I thought I owed you that for my long tongue, and there is an end of it. Now come and sup with me to-night, and show that you have quite forgiven my indiscretion."

His manner was perfectly frank and open, and made me feel that no man could better have excused himself to another for wrong that he had done him. My reserve broke down before his apparent friendliness; my suspicions were disarmed, and I accepted his invitation. He had sought me out of his own motion, and I could not see that he had any end to serve in making my acquaintance. Besides, I must own that my weakness was flattered in receiving the handsome attentions of a man of so much distinction.

We continued talking for some little time, and then he moved away, telling me that he should expect me early. I watched him passing through the throng, whispering and smiling as he went; then there was a sudden silence, for the king had entered the chamber. At the first glance I should hardly have known him. He was dressed in the same suit that he had worn when I had seen him before, but his eyes shone with animation, and there was an almost unnatural glow upon his cheeks. He was evidently in high spirits, for he laughed gaily in the ear of Digby, on whose arm he leaned. The sad, broken visage, the despairing eyes, that I had seen, belonged to another story; I could hardly associate them with the gay and noble figure on which all eyes were centred. Indeed, I think I never saw a statelier person. This was, indeed, the king whom I had pictured—the central figure of a royal court. His manner

was now full of gracious sweetness that was not condescension, yet could not be mistaken for familiarity. I knew now why men loved the king as some men love a woman, and would willingly die for her.

The crowd fell back and left him standing in an open space, his hand still resting on Lord Digby's arm. I stood almost opposite the door he had entered by. It never for a moment occurred to me that the king would single me out or even remember my face. But in this I was mistaken. I watched him for a long time, talking now to this gentleman, now to that, and still moving down the room in the direction where I was standing. His voice was high and clear, and I could distinctly hear his words and the pleasant ripple of his laughter. His eyes suddenly met mine. I was thinking of the last time that I had seen him, and I started as with a sense of guilt. My knowledge of his private sorrow seemed to me like unconscious treason. But he continued his conversation, hardly withdrawing his eyes from me, and then came forward to where I stood. His eyes were lighted with a pleasant smile; there was now no shadow upon his spirits; he seemed to have wholly forgotten what I had seen.

"I am pleased to see you again, Mr. Duncombe. I have been hearing your adventures since I last saw you."

I bowed and was silent.

"It is a good thing to have a friend, a zealous friend, and you have made one. Ashburnham thinks that you were right, and faith, I think so too. Had you sought this quarrel—"

"Lord Wilmot," I said with some eagerness.

The king's brow darkened.

"Had you sought this quarrel," he continued, "you had not been here to-day. Lord Wilmot is his own example, but he has done you tardy justice. I saw to that. Perhaps you were rash and unfortunate, Mr. Duncombe, but yours was a generous fault

Much might have depended on your services, but unhappily nothing could be done. You were the only one to suffer."

"Had I known that, your majesty," I said, "I had been spared much pain."

"I think you speak the truth," he said. "An idle story reached my ears. I regretted to think my favour had been ill-bestowed, but now the truth is clear, I believe you have been wronged. I will see you do not suffer."

"The only favour that I ask is that your majesty should think I wished to serve you."

"Odds, man, you are a born courtier," he said with a smile, "and have the trick of flattering speech. But the tongue is not so useful now as the sword; the talkers are all on the other side. I thought Litchfield might find you employment, but I have changed my mind. I will employ you myself."

"I have no other wish," I said; "I will strive to show that I am not wholly unworthy of your majesty's choice."

He had drawn me a little apart, and had lowered his voice so that no one heard the words he spoke but myself.

"A king's confidence is a perilous favour," he said. "I know that you have a shrewd wit; I think you have spirit and courage. You will need also a close tongue. Keep your own company, trust none, and be ready to take the saddle when you are called. I shall not keep you waiting long. Above all things, forget that we have met before."

As he spoke these last words, he looked at me with a steady gaze, the meaning of which I could not mistake. Then he moved away and left me standing there, at once flattered and perplexed.

There was no reason, certainly I knew of none, that the king should have singled me out in a manner so flattering. I had performed no signal service; I had no powerful friends, and was still without experience or reputation. Besides all this, I was only

now free from a suspicion, if indeed I was free, the most degrading—a suspicion which, it was clear, the king himself had entertained.

I could not guess the nature of the service on which I was to be employed, but it was clear that I was to leave Oxford shortly. Then there rose in my mind the suggestion that I had seen too much, and was therefore to be removed. But this I banished immediately. The king's last words had lent some colour to the thought, but I could not reconcile it with the frankness of his reception and his open manner. Whatever the motive might be, I was flattered and elated beyond measure. I had so long looked forward, with impatience to a career of action; I had dreamed of adventures and royal favour, and it seemed to me that I now stood on the threshold of a new and stirring life. It gave me some hope also that my private misunderstanding with my friends might be removed, for only yesterday I had thought myself irretrievably disgraced, and could see no way to clear myself from charges wholly without foundation. But chance had stepped in, and almost without an effort of my own had removed the intolerable burden.

I returned to my lodging with very different feelings from those with which I had left it, and passed the afternoon with two or three new acquaintances whom I had met at the levée. I saw no reason why I should not accept Lord Wilmot's invitation, and bidding Lockwood sit up for me till my return, I set out about seven o'clock. I found my lord lodged very splendidly, and having a large retinue of servants. He received me very warmly with many professions of friendship, and introduced me with some ceremony to the three gentlemen who were already there. These, I thought, looked at me curiously; but there was nothing in their manner to which I could take any exception. I was still in a suspicious mood, and therefore set my fancy down to that.

They had been playing at cards when I entered, apparently much absorbed in the game, but rose and bowed to me.

"I do not know whether Duncombe plays ; I know he fences," said Wilmot, laughing.

"Your lordship would probably have the best of me here, also," I said, in the same tone.

"Faith, he has had the best of me, too," said one of the gentlemen, taking up the cards. "I have dropped sixty pieces this afternoon. What with Wilmot and his majesty, there will soon be little more of the old plate left. What escapes the one has no chance with the other. I shall presently be left with nothing but my christening mug."

"I'll play you for that, too, George."

"Gad, I think you would ; but before that, I'll forswear the cards, and turn Puritan."

"I will lay you fifty you do that in any case," said his neighbour, with a sneer.

"On provocation, with a good example, I might do worse. I cannot drink since Newbury, and when a man cannot drink, it is time he had taken to praying."

"'Tis the only amusement I have not tried," said Wilmot, with a gay laugh ; "the temptation never was strong enough. Has Sir John brought you to the tabernacle yet, Mr. Duncombe ?"

I looked at him in surprise.

"I suppose the old fox has still that in store for you. It is only when he is primed with liquor that he lets the uncircumcised like myself into his secrets ; but I am told that he has a rare turn for psalm-singing, and can lead a conventicle like a son of thunder. Pious Sir John will come to an unholy end some day."

"I have received nothing but kindness from him," I said. "I think he is honest."

"He is everything in the world, and therefore must be honest. He will drink with you, play with you, and, as I say, pray with you, and cut your throat for

two groats. But he has a pretty daughter and a long sword, and is, therefore, a gentleman of good character. I will not say a word about the lady. I wish her a good husband and a better father."

"The father was still your strong point, Wilmot. Shall we finish our game? Heaven knows when Leigh will arrive."

The name caught my attention, for the speaker stopped as though willing to recall his words, and glanced at me hastily. I said nothing, and there was an awkward silence.

Wilmot spread out the cards with their faces upwards.

"It is strange," he said, "there are only four knaves in the pack; that is strange. Had I been asked, there had been twenty. And they cannot help themselves; knaves they were made, and so remain to the end of the chapter, beyond the grace of Heaven. I think that you and Leigh are neighbours, Duncombe—neighbours and friends?"

"Neighbours," I answered; "hardly friends."

"A quarrel about a fence or a horse?"

"Neither the one nor the other, my lord, but I should prefer not to discuss that subject."

"It is unfortunate that I asked him here to meet you."

"It is unfortunate," I said, now convinced that I was to be baited for the amusement of my host, but determined above all things to keep my temper. "Your lordship does not know the circumstances."

"Faith, I did not think of asking. Leigh said that he would meet you anywhere, but I remember now, he added with a weapon in his hand. *Beati pacifici*. We'll send you to bed drunk together, and the king will overlook my late offence for the sake of my present piety."

"I will lay you an even thirty they spit one another before the hour," my right-hand neighbour whispered, but so that I heard him.

His friend nodded, and they both looked at me

where I had now risen, and was standing with my hand on the back of my chair.

I restrained myself with difficulty. Wilmot lay back with his hands spread palm downwards upon the table. I knew now that he was playing with me, and that this comedy had been arranged beforehand. I was resolved to see the play to an end.

"I came here on your lordship's invitation," I said, "to show that I bore no malice. I thought I was safe at least from insult, but I find there is no protection even as your guest. There are reasons why I cannot at present tell you what I think, but I hope I may yet find the opportunity. I hope I may speak more to the point than I did on the last occasion."

"Even country gentlemen sometimes jest," my lord answered coldly. "You use hard words. I meant nothing. If Leigh did not put his meaning plainly, I am not to blame. I do not carry your secrets in my pocket."

Whether it was that his jest had been too early revealed, I do not know, but he had now thrown off his friendly manner, and spoke with some bitterness. He looked at me with evident dislike.

"It may form another story for his majesty," he continued; "the last has done you credit. This will further advance your fortune."

"I carry no stories," I answered calmly. "For the last you have to thank your own loose—"

"Sword," he answered, leaping to his feet, "but, God's blood, I will write the postscript now."

He pushed back the chair and drew his rapier, but his friends sprang between us, and one of them caught him by the arm. I never moved, but stood quietly looking at him. The king's command restrained me from letting my feelings have their way, and I was resolved, with that in my mind, that nothing should draw me into this quarrel.

While we stood in this attitude, and I making up my mind to take my departure, the door opened and Percival Leigh entered the room. He stopped and

looked first at Wilmot, and then at myself. I saw the look of surprise and the hot flush upon his face.

"The supper is served. You are in time to help at the carving," Wilmot cried out with no trace of passion now in his manner.

"I do not relish the fare you have provided for me, my lord."

Even in the full rush of scorn and indignation that swept through me, I did my old friend the justice to believe that he was not privy to our meeting here, but his contemptuous words and scornful tones cut me like a knife. Until this moment I had been in full possession of myself, but now my natural impetuosity carried me away. This was pure comedy to the spectators, but their laughter increased my vexation and chagrin. I knew that Leigh never suspected the trap that had been laid for us, having no clue to Wilmot's motive, but this was now very clear to myself; he had not forgiven my interruption, and had attributed to me his majesty's displeasure.

We all stood still for a short time. Then I walked over toward the door where Leigh was still standing.

"I make no complaint, my lord," I said halting. "I do not complain of your treatment. I have brought it upon myself. I should have already known you well enough to have known your friends and character. I do not look to find a man of honour here. There are reasons why I cannot now draw my sword."

Leigh had closed the door, and advanced a pace or two toward me. His face was white with passion; his eyes were very bright.

"The man who cannot fight," he said in a low and measured tone, "should not use words like yours. I presume you include me in the language you have now used."

"I have no quarrel with you," I said. "I would not willingly provoke one. I have no doubt these gentlemen will be glad to see us at each other's

throats. For God's sake, man, let me pass, or I may be tempted to do or say what I should regret."

He stood between me and the door, his hat carried under his left arm, and his gloves held loosely in his right hand. I saw the passionate storm of angry feeling in his eyes; I knew that one hasty word would set us both in open conflict. I was determined that that word should not be spoken by me. I felt that he had treated me harshly and unjustly, but there were a hundred reasons that held my hand. And I felt that I could not add to the triumph of the petty malice that had brought us here, and for this very end.

"Light the gentleman forth, Leigh," cried Wilmot with a laugh. "I would make for peace between you."

But Leigh evidently did not hear the words, or if he heard, did not regard them.

"I told you," he said, "that I hoped we should not meet again. I hoped that as much for my sake as your own. There are some matters between us that it would not profit these gentlemen to hear. It is enough that they should know you have insulted me beyond words. There is only one thing left now—we must fight."

"You, at least," I cried, almost beside myself with wonder, "cannot say that I am a coward—you know me too well for that. And I tell you here that nothing will now induce me to draw my sword."

"Perhaps," he answered with a sneer, "your duty to the king—you still were fond of phrases—ties your hands; or have you lost your courage with your honour?"

"Even that," I cried, "will not move me. You do not mean your words."

"Words seem to have lost their meaning. Perhaps you will understand this."

He raised his hand as he spoke, and before I could move, had struck me smartly across the face with the gloves he carried.

In an instant my prudent resolutions were thrown to the winds ; my anger overleaped all control ; my feelings that I had kept in check till now, burst forth, and I was carried away by a wild rush of passion. For a moment I saw nothing, I felt nothing, but the blow. I had not been moved by insinuations, disgraceful as they were unfounded, but now every nerve in my body tingled. No consideration could restrain me—the king's injunction, our old friendship, his sister's love, the presence of my mocking enemy, I forgot them all in the swell and surge of passion. I leapt back, and in an instant had drawn my sword. I hardly knew that it was done until I saw the blade gleaming naked before me.

"Your friends have had their way," I cried. "You are a pitiful fool, Percival Leigh. This is not my fault ; I will stand a blow from no man."

"You have come to reason at last," he said. "I thought you had lost that, too, on the road to Oxford."

I think, but I am not sure, that his sword met mine ; but before we could exchange a pass, Wilmot had sprung between us, and had caught Leigh by the arm.

"This is madness ; you cannot fight here."

"You have provided the occasion," I cried ; "you need not shirk the consequences. Having raised the devil, you now think you will not be able to lay him. It is a poor entertainment when the guests are not allowed to please themselves. Come, Sir Percival, your friend cannot put out the fire so easily as he kindled it. Perhaps I can now settle his score also."

I was quite beside myself with passion, as I say, or I had not used these words that now sound like empty bravado. But I spoke merely the language of my feelings, and I could now see that Wilmot had not reckoned upon their strength and vehemence. He spoke some words in Leigh's ear, and then turned to me, still, however, standing between us.

As I say, sir, this is madness. You may not know that there are stringent laws against the duel here, but I myself have now some reason to remember it. I will not countenance it."

"I desire the light of your lordship's countenance," I answered bitterly, "beyond all things; but here I can do without it. You brought me here to bait, and now you do not know what to do with me. I have already borne too much."

"Oh, you have already shown the patience of the man of Uz," cried my lord, with a sneer. "But that cannot mend it. Leigh will give you satisfaction, I do not doubt, but it must be in the proper time and place."

"The sooner the better," Leigh said. "The affair cannot wait, for I leave Oxford to-morrow. Our account is large, but easily settled."

"Will Mr. Duncombe permit me to act as his friend?" cried one of the gentlemen, coming forward. "I stand with him in this. As I am a gentleman, I think he has been shamefully misused, and had I known what I know now, I had not been here to-night. I thought it but a harmless jest between a pair of friends. In one thing my lord is right—you cannot quarrel here. If you will permit me, I shall willingly act on your behalf, because," and here he bowed to my adversaries courteously, "I love fair play."

I willingly accepted his offer, though I should have preferred to finish the matter there and then, regardless of the consequences. I therefore drew back a little, and left him to make what arrangements he saw fit.

I still held my rapier in my hand, and while I stood moodily apart, I fell to tracing certain characters on the floor with its point. I had not thought of what I did, and I started suddenly and stood face to face with the naked consequences.

I had unthinkingly spelled out his sister's name, and it was only when I had finished that I knew

what I had done. But it was now too late to withdraw even if I might. The call of love was silenced by the voice of honour. However broad and deep the gulf I was about to place between Melody Leigh and myself, I dare not retire a step.

I turned my back on the rest, and walked to the fireplace, where I stood alone for a good while. Then Mr. Etherege, who had proffered me his services, came up and touched me on the shoulder.

"This matter is settled," he said. "If you will permit me, I shall walk with you as far as your lodging. You fight in the morning."

I merely bowed, and followed him across the room. Before I reached the door, my lord lifted a candlestick from the table and preceded us very gravely.

"I would not have you break your neck, sir, and spoil the news I hope to hear to-morrow. His majesty can hardly say I do not keep the peace. Good-night, gentlemen."

He stood upon the landing, watching us make our way down the staircase, and so ended the entertainment which he had provided me. I walked back to the inn with my new friend, who was quite at a loss to account for Wilmot's behaviour, but I did not enlighten him. Moreover, I was in no humour to talk, but was anxious to seek the solitude of my own chamber, and the privacy of my own thoughts. I think he saw that, and forbore to press me. Accordingly, I bade him good-night and promised to be ready at daybreak, when he would call for me.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE SWORD'S POINT.

WHEN I reached the door of my room, I stopped short, believing that I had mistaken the apartment. The sound of rapid footsteps, and a voice raised in a tone of command, came from within. Then I opened the door, and stood watching the scene before me in silent amazement. Sir John Death stood in the middle of the floor, his laced coat thrown aside, and his sword in his hand. Opposite him was my man, Lockwood, his face expressive of the wildest fear, feebly endeavouring at once to parry Sir John's thrusts, and to obey the directions which were given to him with bewildering quickness. On the table, which was pushed aside, were two or three empty bottles, and Sir John's cloak and hat.

"Touched again," cried the colonel; "you fence like a cobbler with a blunt bodkin. Odds, man, keep your hand up, your body resting thus, and your feet in the same line. Now I will thrust in tierce. Bah! you will be five months dead at Lady Day."

Lockwood gave a howl of pain, for the point of the weapon had pricked him more deeply than its owner intended, and then turned round and caught sight of me standing at the door. I never saw upon any face a more instant look of relief take the place of settled despair. He dropped the weapon, my own sword which was a gift from Sir Austin Leigh, and came running toward me.

"Thank God, you have come in time, sir," he cried. "In another minute I had been trussed like a par-

tridge." And then he added under his breath, "I shall bring you help, sir. He is quite demented."

But when Sir John saw me he returned his weapon to the sheath, and advanced unsteadily toward me with both his hands outstretched.

"You have returned in the nick of time, my prince of Trojans," he cried, somewhat huskily; "I began to lose my temper. I had turned a *maitre d'armes* for once, and would make a soldier for the King or Parliament—God's wounds, I forget which now—I think his majesty. Pish! He may turn a spit or sew a jerkin or carry coals. On my honour as a gentleman, the man was born a tailor. Let's have another bottle, Duncombe, and I will tell you my story. I'm on the Spanish Main to-night."

"You are in my room, Colonel Death," I said with some show of temper, "and have already drunk enough. What is the meaning of this mumming?"

"Is it thus you speak to my grey hairs; to a man old enough to be your father? Give me a chair, clown, and get to bed, for I would speak with your master."

I motioned to Lockwood to humour him, knowing that in this way I would be soonest quit of his company, and I myself sat down with as much patience as I could command. When Lockwood had retired he drew his chair close to mine, and, leaning forward, laid his hand upon my knee.

"I have drunk a quart of Rhenish," he said, "and sundry glasses of strong water, and I dare not go home. I sow my wild oats out of doors, as you know, and let Satan gather them *al fresco*. Drinking! drinking! the devil's in it, Duncombe, but I think I am nearer the kingdom of heaven drunk than sober."

I looked at him with open eyes, for there was a strange earnestness in the wild drunken speech.

"I was born crooked," he cried, "as some men are born dumb. I could not walk straight for an hour

together. In my sober moments my wits all march the one way, and tramp to the devil's music, and care not where they lead me.

“ ‘ For some do call me Jack, sweetheart,
And some do call me Jill,
But when I come to the king's fair court
They call me Wilful Will.’ ”

But open my eyes with good liquor, and then I see the end of my ways. I see them now—dicing, drinking, drabbing. I've eaten of the husks till I've grown like the swine that feeds on them. 'Tis a curious thing, I am only repentant when—pshaw! I did not come to say this.”

“ Then come to the point.”

“ Don't spur a willing horse. Is it true that you were at his majesty's reception this morning, and that he cooed in your ear like a mating ringdove, and gave you his hand to kiss as a parting favour? Is that true?”

“ That I was at court—yes.”

“ Then the breach is healed, and you have made your peace?”

I nodded assent.

“ You are a fool, and I have come hither to tell you that. God's blood, can you not see that before twelve months are over there will be no king in merry England. The Parliament is holding every trump and lifts the stakes. A battered hulk like myself might drift with the rest of the wreckage—king, court, church, crown, and baubles—let us go and never say amen. But a young fellow like yourself, with a good name, a ready wit, and a strong hand, may climb upon the ruins higher than you dream of.”

“ This is rank treason,” I cried; “ I will not hear you.”

“ You have made one powerful friend,” he went on, not heeding me, “ whom I promised—bah! what are my promises? You may not thank me, but I tried

to serve you, and put your feet on the ladder that you have kicked from under you. What can the king do for you, man? For a smile on his sickly face, an empty place in his tottering court, or a gew-gaw like that on your finger, you go to feed the crows, or starve in France or Flanders. Truth is at the bottom of the quart measure. Egad, I must be drunk."

"I think you are," I said. "What have you seen in me to talk thus?"

"The making of better things than a landless out-at-elbows like myself. You see me now. I fought at Newbury, was wounded at Stratton, ran for my life at Marston, and here I sit now, and having drunk my host's wine I have not wherewith to discharge the reckoning. The king's favour—pah, give me the side that comes uppermost. I travel with the saints."

"These are dangerous words to use," I said, "and may be misunderstood. I know you do not mean them."

"Do I not?" he answered with a sneer. "They have used me like a pack-horse, and never spared the whip. Honest Sir John, stand here; gallant Sir John, fight there; and they clap Sir John on the back, while all the time they whisper that the old rogue drinks too much, and must be turned out when his day is over. The king passed me yesterday as though I was a sign-post pointing to Westminster. Perhaps I am. I tell you plainly I care nothing."

"I refuse," I said, "to hear your confidences. You have shown me kindness, and I will not quarrel with you; but I am sorry that I did not know your mind before. Henceforth we must walk apart."

He looked at me some time doubtfully, and then he rose and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said, "as much for your sake as my own, and the sake of— Perhaps you are right. If you go to the devil, go honestly. But I would have saved you had you let me. I had built up a house of cards for you that, it seems, will not stand; mine ever come tumbling down, and then I

begin to build another. Some day I may build something that will stand."

All this time I paid little attention to his wild words, for I thought he hardly knew what he said, and that his sense of disappointment and poverty possessed him. Besides, I was so deeply engaged with my own affairs that I had little mind for any other. I therefore endeavoured to persuade him to leave me, and offered to find him a bed in the inn, which, after some persuasion, he at length agreed to accept.

"Look you, Mr. Duncombe," he said as he rose and unsteadily gathered up his cloak and hat, "my head is buzzing, and I think I have been talking some nonsense—I forget what. My daughter must not hear of this—not a whisper. She thinks—heaven knows what she thinks."

When I had got rid of my strange acquaintance, I sat down to settle my thoughts which till now had been in a disordered state. This quarrel had been so forced upon me that I could not honourably avoid it, though I think I would willingly have given my right hand that it had not happened. I knew that some cause more than common had turned my old friend against me and provoked his enmity. It was no ordinary misunderstanding that had broken the long and enduring friendship between us. But it was now probable that I should never learn the true circumstances. There was now no opportunity left for explanation, but blundering in the dark, one or other of us must fall, and I wished with all my heart that I might be the one. I dared not think of the other alternative, for though at that moment I was smarting and sore, I had no feeling of enmity and hatred in my heart. I rather felt that we were both victims of a miserable and unfortunate mistake by which, however it ended, we must both suffer. I knew Leigh's impetuous spirit, hot and prompt to strike, and I knew that equally with myself he would suffer for a hasty and irrevocable blow.

Many times I walked up and down the chamber,

pursued by old memories, filled with new despair. I was like a man chained to a stake, who sees the tide advancing that he knows must shortly cover him, and all the while about him are the dear, familiar places of his youth—the sea, the land, the shores he haunted, and the hills whose lights and shadows filled his heart with joy. It is ever a friend's hand that strikes deepest.

I was anxious to leave behind me some record of my fidelity, and wholly to clear myself in her eyes who at that moment possessed a large share of my thoughts. Accordingly I sat down, and began to write what proved a long and, I fear, a rambling narrative, broken by many interjections and coloured by my morbid fancies. When I had finished I dared not read what I had written, but hastily sealed and directed it to Melody Leigh. This being done, I called Lockwood, who had not yet gone to bed, and handed it to him.

"I am going forth in the morning," I said, "and may not return. Should that happen, you will take this to Mistress Leigh. For the rest, you will then call on Master Empson the lawyer. He will find certain papers in that trunk which he will know what to do with. You can then return to Duncombe."

He looked at me curiously, and then laid the letter upon the table.

"I shall do no such errand," he said bluntly.

"You will do what I tell you."

"By your leave, I will not. I know what these morning walks mean, and how they end. You are too young to make your will yet, and I will not put my mark to it."

"I ask you to do nothing of the kind. Was there ever such a fool?"

"I will not say, my master, but I have my own opinion. I saw this coming days ago. You have been looking sword blades and speaking daggers, and old Sir John has been clapping you on the back, and egging you on for some purpose of his own. And he

has been telling me that you would marry his daughter after all. He was drunk, but he meant it."

"Sir John has robbed you of your wits," I said angrily. "He has nothing to do with this."

"There is the measure of his foot somewhere," he answered doggedly, and with that sullen faithfulness that never failed him. "I would that you had never seen him. And Mistress Leigh—For God's sake, you do not say that this is with Sir Percival."

"I say nothing. You will do my bidding and take the letter in the morning."

"When the life's out 'tis too late for a blister. A word now would save many hereafter. And Sir Percival, I know 'tis he. This will be strange news at Duncombe, sir."

"I am going to bed now," I said, "and start early. I may be here to breakfast."

"And may never eat another. I know the way. I could not have thought it, sir. If you would but take Sir John by the neck, and shake his sins out of him, you would set the matter straight. An obstinate man's way is the devil's highroad."

I left him upbraiding me in his blunt, outspoken way, and sought my bedroom, where the lantern hanging without gave me all the light I needed. I threw myself upon my bed, and, strange to say, fell into a deep sleep, altogether unbroken and untroubled. At daybreak I awoke with a start, fearing that I had overslept myself, for the grey dawn was already growing broad and clear as I rose. When I looked out, there was a crisp rime upon the window-panes, and the whiteness of frost on the roofs and spires that rose before me. It was the work of a few minutes to dress myself. Going downstairs, I found the tapster having opened the front-door, and Mr. Etherege standing waiting there, with his cloak drawn about his face. When we had interchanged greetings, which we did very cordially, he proposed that we should walk to the place, as there was abundant time. I consented readily, it being very raw and cold, and we

set out together. I saw that my new friend was desirous to raise my depressed spirits, and talked without ceasing in a light and cheerful vein, nor did he once mention the cause that had brought us forth. To judge from his speech, it might have seemed a matter of amusement on which we were bent; and I permitted him to talk without interruption.

The trees and hedgerows shone like silver in their filigree work of late frost, the road was frozen hard under foot, and the round red sun shone like a great lamp through the delicate and drooping mist. Now and again the silver stir of a bell awakened the still, cold air, and the shrill cry of a flock of birds passing to inland waters. We walked rapidly, and the swift motion helped me to throw off the lethargy that till now had oppressed me.

When we reached the ground, we found that my opponent had not yet arrived—a smooth meadow on the roadside, where the highway ran quite in sight for nearly a mile, shut off only by a low hedge and a row of pollarded trees. At one end of this meadow was a little natural amphitheatre, with half-a-dozen great stones piled up at one side, and this, I learned, was a frequent place of meeting for those whose honour wanted mending.

We stood here for some time, walking to and fro to keep ourselves warm, for it was very cold, and then Mr. Etherege proposed that we should exercise ourselves with our rapiers, which we accordingly did. After a pass or two he said, "You fence well, better than Leigh. I have seen him play. You can kill him if you please."

"That would do me a great deal of good," I answered. "Why should I kill him?"

"Because otherwise he will probably kill you. It is a matter of choice. In these things I confess I like to be on the hilt's side, not the point's. Mr. Duncombe, will you pardon me if I say you do not seem to care which?"

"God knows, I think I do care."

"And that?"

"The point, if you must have it."

"A curious taste."

"'Tis a curious case. I do not know why I am here to-day. We have been friends since boyhood, bound by kind offices and family ties. I never did him wrong, even in my thoughts. You saw me struck—and there are other reasons why I dare not kill him if I could."

"The woman—who is she?"

"The woman?"

"I have been listening for the rustle of the petticoat—the still, small voice in the heart of these storms. Heaven knows I have heard it too often. A false woman and a false friend make all the evil in the world—generally the first."

"There is here neither the one nor the other that I know of."

"It is the riddle of the Sphinx."

He looked at me with raised eyebrows, and then as we turned, we saw Leigh and his second, who proved to be Lord Gainsford, crossing the fence, and coming toward the place where we stood. They came slowly, and Etherege advanced a little way to meet them, I remaining where I was. Then Etherege took my lord aside, and for a very long time they stood apart, conversing earnestly. I do not know what was the subject of their conversation, but I think my friend, who on this occasion, as on others, showed himself a gentleman of good feeling and fine spirit, endeavoured to find some ground for reconciliation or compromise. I saw the faces of both were very grave, but that of my lord set in a look of blank negation.

I must own that, for my part, I had no hope that they would arrive at an amicable understanding, and therefore when Mr. Etherege returned, I experienced no feeling of disappointment.

"I have gone out of my way," he said, "to arrive at some terms that might be honourable to both of you. I have wholly failed. It appears that Sir Percival

Leigh declares he holds in his hand some proof of unfriendliness, Lord Gainsford does not know what—that admits of no explanation or apology. You must therefore fight, and I would advise you not to let your late friend put you twice in the wrong.”

I merely bowed, knowing his meaning, and then I laid aside my coat and cloak, and with a heavy heart drew my rapier from the scabbard. Even at that moment I had not made up my mind what my conduct should be. I knew from experience that I was the better swordsman of the two; but I could scarce bear to think that that skill which I had first learned from the father should be put in practice against the son. I therefore hung in the wind as I bared my arm and turned up the ruffles of my shirt.

Lord Gainsford had bowed to me coldly and with a very distant courtesy, but Leigh never once looked in my direction. He divested himself of his coat with a hard, set face, and then advanced towards where I stood, with his eyes cast upon the ground. We formally saluted one another with our weapons. It had been arranged that our seconds should not fight, though I think Mr. Etherege would have preferred the other course; and they took up their position, one on either side of us. The sun was now high, and the air was clear and warmer. On the little platform where we stood the hoar frost had altogether disappeared, and the grass under our feet was a vivid green, for, as I have said, it was now the advanced spring.

We stood quite close to one another, and as our rapiers touched, our eyes met for the first time. I do not know the thoughts that filled my friend's heart; I only know the passion that possessed my own. I had no sooner heard the deadly ring of steel, and seen the eyes that met my own in stern hostility, than every kindly thought and tender memory left me utterly. The wild instinct that lurks in the blood was awakened into life, and I resolved, if that was resolve which was merely instinct, to defend myself at any cost.

From the first my opponent pressed me hard, and

I stood merely on the defensive. Once and again I parried his thrust, and once, I think, I could have struck him, but I determined to take my own way and time for that. Never in my life had I felt so completely master of my weapon; never had my hand been firmer, my eye truer.

It is strange what tricks the mind can play. Even while my eyes were riveted on the eyes before me, and every nerve in my body was drawn to its extremest tension, I saw my lord make a sign to Etherege of which I knew the meaning. I smiled with a sense of superiority, and I saw that ungenerous smile reflected in Leigh's face in a darker look of hatred and contempt.

Suddenly Gainsford leaped between us with his drawn rapier up.

"Hold," he cried; "here is company."

We turned on the instant to look the one way, and saw a lady in a scarlet riding cloak having just leapt her horse over the fence of which I have spoken. Another rider had drawn up on the road, and sat there motionless. We watched the lady riding towards us in amazement, her cloak drawn about her figure, and her hat concealing her face. But for all that, I knew her in a moment, though I think none of the others guessed then. As she came up I turned a little and looked at Leigh. I saw the recognition in his face, for his cheek grew quite pale, and his lips formed into an exclamation of anger and indignation. But otherwise he did not betray his feelings. None of us spoke or moved till she came close and reined in her horse. Then I saw the face of Melody Leigh, her cheeks a bright scarlet and her eyes shining with excitement.

"By G—!" I heard Etherege cry under his breath, "'tis Mistress Leigh—the woman, after all."

Then he advanced with his hat in his hand and caught the horse by the bridle. She merely thanked him with a nod and leaped lightly to the ground.

Leigh and myself had never moved, being rooted by wonder there, and she came between us, holding

up her long dress, and carrying her riding switch in her hand. I saw many emotions written legibly on her face, and seeing that I knew that I could read her heart truly ; my own gave a great leap, and I cared nothing for the result.

"Put up your swords in the presence of a lady," she said with a sweet audacious smile. "I wonder at you, gentlemen."

I instantly returned mine to its scabbard without a word, but her brother looked at her sternly, and did not stir.

"What does this mean?" he cried. "These gentlemen must not understand—"

"That you are fighting about me? No, I am sure they will not think that. My lord, I know, will help me here."

I am sure he had no great will, but he murmured something that sounded like acquiescence.

"You have known each other all your lives," she said, "and it seems to little purpose. I do not know the reason of your bitterness, but were it ten times more you should not fight. Mr. Duncombe, I could not have believed this."

"I am not here, madam," I answered, "willingly. I have been forced to this ; I know not why."

"And I dare to say my brother says the same?"

"I say nothing in the presence of these gentlemen. I regret that you saw right to interfere."

He spoke now quite temperately, but I knew that it was merely pride that restrained his vehemence.

"I should never have forgiven myself if I had failed," she answered with spirit. "This has gone too long : a word may set it right."

"Whatever happens, Mistress Leigh," said Etheridge in his fine manner, "these gentlemen must now obey you. It were treason to deny you."

"I have been injured," I answered, "but I withdraw willingly. This quarrel was not of my making. I am not conscious of having done any wrong or committed any offence."

"These are fine words," said Leigh; "this is no Parliament. In my sister's presence, since she has so far honoured us, we cannot fight. But I may now, Mr. Duncombe, restore your property, which I hope may be useful in the future. I may say that no eyes but my own have seen it since it was sent to me by an unknown friend."

I looked at him in wonder, for he spoke with a marked meaning. Then he turned upon his heel, and going over to his vest that lay upon the grass at some distance, he drew from the pocket a scroll of paper, which he opened, and then folded carefully. This he placed on the point of his rapier, and coming over, presented it to me.

"Your property, sir."

I knew in a moment what it was, and the knowledge robbed me completely of my presence of mind—the pass that I had lost, with my own name and Cromwell's written there. I was so taken by surprise that I did not know what to do, but at last I reached, and took it without a word. The explanation was so easy and yet involved so much that I hesitated to speak, and finally said nothing. They all looked at me; there was a profound silence that I knew they waited for me to break. But I was wholly unable to say a word. I knew that they read conscious guilt in my confusion and silence. I could not help it, but stood utterly confounded. Then I raised my eyes and looked at Melody Leigh. I saw the high, bright look of hope and expectation pass from her face; she continued to look at me, but her expression had now grown doubtful and perplexed.

She was the first to break the silence.

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked.

"Nothing," I answered, "that I can say now—nothing that would be believed by my friend who believes this."

"One thing I would know," she said, looking at me steadily with her sweet, clear eyes; "I am content to

know no more. Mr. Duncombe, does this touch your truth and honour?"

"Before Heaven!" I cried, "I am wholly blameless."

"Then," she said, "whoever doubts you I say in the presence of these gentlemen that I believe you."

She held out her hand, but her brother stepped between us.

"Only yourself and I, sir, know the contents of that document. Those considerations that have moved my sister now hold my hands. I have not blazoned forth your shame; I have spared you for the sake of our early friendship. I am certain that these gentlemen will appreciate my motives though I do not share my sister's trustfulness. The moment you forget you are a stranger to myself and to all who bear my name, I shall use the secret that I hold, and use it without sparing you."

Why, I have often asked myself, did I not then boldly face the difficulty, and whatever the result, offer the explanation that even then trembled upon my tongue? I cannot tell; I do not know. Prompt as I always was to give my thought its speech, I was merely silent and saw them turn away and leave me—suspected and denounced. If my life had depended upon a word, I could not have uttered it.

Mr. Etherege and myself remained standing alone. He watched me with an amused smile, for this had seemed to him only a comedy that Leigh had played to cover his sister's retreat. I knew that he was now convinced that this was a private quarrel, in which Melody Leigh had played a part, and his first words showed that.

"I heard the rustle after all; I knew it from the first."

"I fail to apprehend your meaning."

"Let it go," he said; "it is not my business. I would risk something for a smile myself."

"I cannot have you think this, Mr. Etherege," I said gravely. "Mistress Leigh has no part, absolutely none, in my misunderstanding with her brother. We have not quarrelled with regard to any matter in which she is concerned. These were my earliest friends—our early friendship moved her."

He made no answer to this, but I saw that he was now perceptibly cooler in his manner. To believe my explanation was also to believe Leigh's unspoken accusation. I read his doubts in his eyes, and was more than once tempted to make him my confidant, and ask his advice and counsel. But an obstinate pride prevented me. I merely asked him to suspend his judgment, and keep private what had passed for reasons personal to myself and affecting Mistress Leigh. This he promised to do, and in this he showed himself a worthy gentleman and kept his promise faithfully.

May the turf lie lightly on his ashes! In that wild onset up the hill at Naseby, a few months afterwards, when the wild red tide of battle rolled up the hill and broke in blood against the unmoving steel of Cromwell's Ironsides, his soul went up to God. And there I lost a gallant friend.

Lockwood was laying out breakfast when I returned. He held the white tablecloth suspended in his hand, and he looked at me over it with the air of one very well satisfied with himself.

"I thought you would have brought your friend, sir. Fighting gives one an appetite. A wrestling match or a cockfight—"

"Bring me the letter that you had of me last night," I said, "and let me know what the devil brought you out on the road this morning, and the grey gelding going lame."

"The joint was growing stiff," he answered demurely, "and wanted exercise. For the letter—an errand once done is well over. That I delivered last night."

I knew not now whether to be angry or content. For a moment I was the former, but immediately recovered myself, and was glad to think that Melody had in her hands the full account of my adventure, and knew that my feelings toward her were unchanged.

"You blockhead," I cried, "were my instructions not as plain as words could make them? I told you—"

"A great deal more than you meant, sir. Hasty words bear ill fruit. A letter from a dead man is never pleasant reading, and I thought, perhaps, it might want an answer; it had been a pity you had not been alive to get it. But she would not read it, though I tried hard to make her."

"What?"

"She laid it down and looked at me, just as I have seen Sir Austin when he found his spirit and forgot his books. She wanted to know how I came to get it and why I left it. And though I knew I had no business to speak of it, before I could help myself it had all come out, and the mischief was done. It was no fault of mine."

"What did she say?" I said, in spite of myself.

"Nothing for a while. Then she would have had me take the letter back, telling me that my master did not intend that she should read it now, which I could not gainsay, though I thought it foolish. Then she put it in her bosom, but I think that was after she asked for Mistress Death."

"You did not carry any of your foolish tales?"

"Trust me for that, sir. I know a woman better than that. The colonel's daughter was no beauty when I had finished with her, and I never told her a word about—"

"That will do," I cried; "you have had it your own way, and I must be contented. In future do what I tell you."

He did not make any answer, going on with his

work, but I saw from the look on his face that he was perfectly satisfied with himself, and that there was in all likelihood more of the story behind which he had not thought it fit to tell me.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LADY IN THE MASK

I HAD as yet got no employment nor any further offer than that held out by his majesty and Mr. Ashburnham. In the meantime it was now no secret that the king was about to take the field with what strength he could raise to strike a decisive blow against the new levies of which we had heard so much. Royal messengers were coming and going constantly; fresh troops were daily entering and leaving the city, and the king himself appeared frequently in public. The movement, the parade, the throng of splendid names, the thousand incidents of military preparation, filled every passing day with an absorbing interest—an interest that deepened as the hour drew nearer for departure. There were few who read the stormy portents of the times (and now how plain they seemed) who did not feel that the king was about to make the final throw in this fratricidal game. But for the most part it was with hope and expectation of success. The enthusiasm and joyous courage of my friends had their effect upon myself, and kindled my declining ardour into a great and splendid flame.

The contagion was irresistible. There was no end to loyal toasts and loyal songs. Wherever friends and comrades met, the pledge was still the same—"The Cause—the King." No words that I can use could describe the invincible loyalty and devotion of the gallant gentlemen who had willingly abandoned everything for the king they loved. Our blood runs colder now. We have learned the lessons of political wisdom,

and our allegiance is now tempered with civil wisdom. This was the magnificent youth of loyalty, and in its wealth of passion was no room for calm reserve.

But it is merely my own memoirs that I propose to write—the simple story of an adventurous manhood. To others I leave the writing of that great historical drama with its varying pictures leading up to that great final scene of which I hardly yet can bear to write.

For myself, I waited each day with impatience for the king's summons, and at last began to think that I had been either forgotten or set aside. My natural pride forbade my offering myself for employment even where there were many calls and opportunities. While any shadow of my late accusation rested upon me, I rather preferred to wait upon events.

I learnt that Leigh had left Oxford, though whither he had gone I did not know. I saw his sister at times, but always at a distance, and without any attempt upon my part to renew our friendship. Here also my pride stepped between us, and though I did not doubt that her affection was not changed, I was resolved to wait till nothing stood between myself and perfect confidence. The temptation was, at times, strong and well-nigh irresistible, but I succeeded in controlling my desires, and worshipped at a distance.

For nearly a fortnight I continued to wait, and then the imperative summons came which roused me from my dreams and again plunged me in the stress and storm of action. Early in the morning one of the king's pages appeared in my bedroom almost before I was awake, with a message that the king would see me forthwith. I was to follow the messenger without delay, as the matter was urgent. He carried with him a note which was very laconic in its terms, and told me nothing—only that the time was come when I was needed. But, indeed, this was as much as I had any desire to hear.

I called Lockwood, who was then at breakfast, and bade him prepare immediately for my departure, and have all ready on my return. He looked at me

with his mouth still full and a trickle of ale upon his coat where he had upset the tankard in his haste, and seemed by no means pleased at the tidings. He had found his quarters at the Wheatsheaf very comfortable, and had himself no love for adventure. But I cut short his lamentation, and hurriedly prepared to obey the king's command. Without giving the matter a second thought, I put on my grey riding suit which had newly come from the tailor, for I was desirous to show that I was ready at once to take the road. Then I made my breakfast very hurriedly and without appetite, my impatience being too great and my anxiety too strong. I do not think I cared on what business I was to be employed or what my destination. At that day it was enough to know that I had been chosen to serve the king, and that my sword and courage were needed in his cause. All else came after that. Even had I known where this summons was to lead me, and into what strange paths, I do not think I should have hesitated or delayed. It is only in the after years that we look to the end of our journey and count the first steps.

When I was ushered into the king's cabinet I found his majesty already seated at the table—it was but little after eight—with many papers spread before him, and a map on which I could see a number of places marked with a red line. He glanced up for a moment as I entered, and bowed to me very pleasantly, but continued to write for a good space of time. It was a pleasant room, filled with the morning sunshine, and looking out upon a courtyard. The walls were covered with hangings of some silk stuff, but the furniture was very plain and simple. One thing, however, caught my eye almost the moment that I came in, a portrait of the queen, very fair and life-like, that stood in the darkest corner upon a kind of stand or easel. The painter—perhaps Cornelius Jansen—had caught the eloquent look in her dark eyes, and her lips seemed to move with a sweet and tender smile.

I stood waiting till the king should have finished,

and now, for the first time, I saw how aged and worn he was growing. His hair was becoming grey, the lines upon his forehead and cheeks were deep and frequent, and his hand that held the pen trembled a little on the paper before him. But whatever he was writing, his face was flushed with a gay and happy look—the look of one filled with tender thoughts and cheerful memories. His pen moved rapidly over the paper, and only the sound of that was plain to be heard in the silence of the room. Then he suddenly finished, and looking up, caught me with my eyes fixed on the queen's portrait.

He rose from his seat and pushed back his chair.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," he said gravely ; "but I am no longer master of my time. I am about to redeem the promise that I made, and give you an opportunity of showing yourself prompt and faithful in my service. It is a great trust for one so young and inexperienced as yourself—among the greatest—but I think you will not fail me."

I bowed, and was silent.

"You have made a friend," he continued, "who praises your courage and discretion ; but I think that I myself can read the face and heart, and I am assured I shall not find you wanting."

"Your majesty will find me faithful," I stammered, in wonder at this prologue.

"I ask much ; I expect much. You are about to undertake a dangerous duty, hazardous and full of peril, and one that calls for judgment, courage and resource. You have no ties, I think—those, I mean, that make us stagger in the face of danger, and mirror forth our fears to fright us in the glass of love ? He is a happy man, Mr. Duncombe, who has neither wife nor children in these evil times."

He had passed to the end of the room while he was speaking, and I knew that while he spoke his eyes were resting on the portrait. I knew also that he was speaking the thoughts of his own heart, and I did not answer him.

Then he turned and came again to the table.

"When you return," he said, in an altered voice, "there will be another tale to tell, and in another place."

"When I return, your majesty?"

"I hope to see you in Whitehall. But there is much to do before that time arrives. It is coming slowly. They tell me you have never left the kingdom?"

"No, your majesty."

"I have heard that you speak the French tongue with fluency; that was the first reason why I chose you for this service. This you will place in the hands of Cardinal Mazarin."

"To France?" I cried.

"To France. Does that astonish you?" He looked at me very stedfastly, but I did not flinch.

"I am willing to do your majesty's bidding to the end of the world."

He smiled at my ready answer.

"You will probably have an interview with his eminence, who professes himself my good friend, but whose professions have not hitherto borne their natural fruit. Be wary in your answers, and do not understate my present strength. But you have no certain news; you are but the bearer of my letter, no ambassador. You follow my instructions?"

I bowed assent.

"This other letter—"

There is no instrument that ever was invented, or will be, with such variety as the human voice. I think there is no passion or shade of feeling, however delicate, to which it does not instantly respond and give expression.

"This," he continued, in a voice wonderfully softened and sad beyond words, "this you will place in the queen's hands, and in hers alone. The other is, so to speak, but silver; this is gold. I doubt not she will question you searchingly; then you must tell the truth. I am well and hopeful, and about to bring her

enemies and mine to reason. The rest she will find here."

"I think I understand, your majesty. There is nothing more?"

"Nothing—stay. In this matter confide in no one, trust no one. Be secret and wary, for these letters must on no account miscarry, for my enemies would give much to have sight of them. You will embark at Rye; a vessel will there be provided by a faithful friend. But Ashburnham will give you further instructions upon that head, and furnish you with the means for your journey. Adieu. I wish at times that I was going too."

But, indeed, I saw that wish expressed in his face as he looked at me. Then he gave me his hand to kiss, and having once more repeated his cautions, our interview ended.

When I saw the king again—but that will be told in its place. In the meantime, I trod upon air; I was raised and elated beyond measure at the confidence that had been reposed in me, and the career that seemed about to open before me. Of the dangers and difficulties that were likely to beset me, I thought nothing, or dismissed them lightly. I had the most absolute confidence in myself and my own resources, and was determined, if watchfulness and zeal availed, to carry my mission through to a successful issue. But Mr. Ashburnham, to whom I now knew I owed his majesty's choice, gravely pointed out the risks, and sought to impress me with the serious nature of my embassy. The ports, he said, were closely guarded, suspected persons were vigilantly watched, and to leave the coast was a thing attended with great risk and peril. I must use infinite caution, and show such prudence as a man would exercise when even his life hangs upon a hair. I should meet a friend in the town of Rye, to whom had been entrusted the care of providing a vessel, and to whom I must make myself known. It was possible that I might have some days to wait there for his arrival,

during which time I must by no means venture abroad. The owner of the house was believed to be well affected to the king, though he was obliged to conceal his loyalty where discontent was strong. Him I might trust with a measure of reserve, but especially I must rely upon my own wisdom and courage. This and much more he said, and I listening with fitting gravity; but all the time I was longing for the highroad and the ring of flying hoofs. My natural impatience made light of difficulties; my inexperience smiled at danger. But, none the less, I noted the directions which he gave me heedfully, and it was fortunate for myself and my trust that I did. Finally, he bade me farewell with much affection, and I returned to the inn to complete my preparations, it being arranged that I should set out at daybreak the next morning.

One incident happened as I was returning to my lodging which I think it right to set down. I had come very near the Wheatsheaf when a voice called out my name, and looking round I saw Colonel Death come through the door of a tavern, very plainly dressed, and quite divested of his usual tawdry finery. I had not seen him for some time, not, indeed, since the night I had put him to bed, for from that time I had made up my mind to avoid his company.

He was quite sober now, and graver than I had ever seen him, though even now not free from his solemn humour.

"It is hard," he said, coming up, "even to catch sight of the winged Mercury. You are overfull of the secrets of the court, man."

"I have yet to hear the secrets," I said quietly.

"Secrets that every groom and horse-boy knows with the wise heads that make them. Even discarded soldiers like myself get wind of them. We both are riding forth, it seems."

"I did not know that you were leaving Oxford."

While I spoke I cursed Lockwood's blundering tongue, for I did not doubt that in some way this in-

formation had come through my loquacious servant. I had come to fear Sir John Death. But I found afterwards that neither Lockwood nor myself was to blame.

"I have rotted here long enough," he answered moodily.

"When do you set out?"

"Whither?"

He looked at me with a smile.

"There is wisdom in the air of Oxford. If his majesty were open to its influence it were better for his subjects. Whither? probably on a fool's errand if the truth were known. Go home, my friend, and till your peaceful acres. Leave us here, the rogues and fools, to settle this."

"Sir John," I said gravely, "some time since you spoke some words a man of honour should not speak. You have not now the excuse—"

"I know your meaning. A man in liquor sometimes speaks the truth. The truth—pshaw! Before God, Duncombe, I hope we may never meet again."

I think he saw my question in my face.

"The devil alone can tell where I am bound; he finds the means, and pays the charges."

"These are wild words, Colonel Death," I said. "Your daughter—"

He started as though I had struck him.

"Do not name her; she is dead to me—dead and gone. I stand alone without—paugh! I begin to rant like a player who would waken the pit. She has found me out, my friend, and will have no more to do with her excellent father. Faith, I do not blame her. I had loved her less had she done otherwise. 'Tis curious how the blood runs. I had myself a pious father, now at home with God for twenty years. He prayed over his small beer, and rendered thanks for his home-laid eggs. My daughter, who is an angel, cannot say the same."

"That is not her fault," I said uncharitably.

"Nor mine, but His that made me what I am. I may be no Christian, but a sounder theologian never

came from Geneva. But John Death and his daughter are nothing to the king's messenger."

This he said bitterly, and with an evident meaning that I did not fail to comprehend. I felt that our meeting here in the public street was not a chance encounter, but that he had waited for me and met me with some hidden purpose of his own. As I say, I had begun to fear him, though my fears were yet indefinite, and had taken no tangible form. The hints that he had continually dropped, the bold words that he had spoken in moments of passion or forgetfulness, had already convinced me that in his own crooked fashion he played a game in which he sought to use me. No man ever possessed certain qualities in larger measure—promptness, courage, resource, dexterity, but guided in such way as to suggest a want of sanity and judgment. At times, indeed, he seemed almost without sober reason, but even then full of cleverness and subtlety. How far he was himself willing to go I had begun to guess.

In the meantime I was waiting to learn how much he knew, and if possible to discover his own purpose in this meeting.

"You harp upon that string, Colonel Death," I said. "My private business, if I have any, seems to have an interest for you."

"You had one friend in Oxford," he answered, "and you turned your back on him like the rest of the world. I had an interest in the man who saved my daughter, and would have helped him if he had let me. When you are laid by the heels you will remember my warning, and own that I acted honestly by you."

"These dark hints give me little help," I said. "If you would be honest, show me what I have to fear."

"Your friends' loose tongues, your own folly, and—I do not play this game with my hand of cards upon the table. But I tell you there is an ace for the king, the queen is a jade, and the knave is the best card in the pack. Now go, and remember the warning of

John Death, late of Thirlmere Hall in the County of Kent, and now your faithful if neglected servant."

He bowed to me with a mocking look in his eyes and left me before I had time to recover from my surprise. It was clear that he knew the object with which I was setting forth, and that I was menaced with some danger of which he had private knowledge. For my own safety I knew how necessary it was that the secrecy which the king had so earnestly impressed upon me should be preserved, and I doubted whether with the information I now had I should not seek further instructions. But my pride prevented this; that and a desire to take my own course and to trust to my own resources. Above all I was impatient to embark upon my adventure and afraid lest it might be interrupted or delayed. I therefore determined to keep my own counsel, and only exercise the greater vigilance and caution.

But I own that I was startled and shaken. At every turn when I had met this man a cloud had fallen upon my fortunes. He had always seemed anxious to serve me; he had always professed himself my friend; yet disaster had always attended our intercourse, which I was not now slow in tracing to his influence. For a long time I had paid no heed to his fantastic and extravagant speeches, treating them only as the windy spray of a mind unsettled and agitated as the sea—the careless rhetoric of misfortune. But more lately I had begun to observe a certain purpose and consistency running through them that awakened first my doubt and then my fear. A new light was now thrown on certain things I could not understand before, and I was now able to follow the ravelled skein of my fortunes since I had come to Oxford. It seemed that I had been the only one who had been mistaken in his character and deceived by his professions. I am willing to admit that I was completely. Indeed with all his faults I had come to regard him almost as a friend; his cheerful audacity, his wild humour, his flashes of tenderness, had touched

my heart that was yet open to such influences and had a tolerant sympathy for weakness.

I returned to my lodging full of misgivings, yet with my mind fully made up to take all the risks. Lockwood had already finished his task, and was greatly relieved to hear that I did not need his services. While he waited upon me, he showed his feelings in a thousand ways, and was full of sententious maxims and wise proverbs, making full use of his privilege as an old servant. "A wise horse loves his stable, and a wise man his own fireside. Honour goes well in a song but is a poor plaster for a broken head. Lie low when the storm is brewing. Come into supper when the guests have done fighting. Pay the king's taxes and let him settle his own quarrel. The field of glory is a hard bed, that you are like to sleep on for ever."

With these and a thousand other saws he gave utterance to his wisdom, to none of which I made any answer, but let him ramble on till he saw that his sapience was lost upon me. When I had finished dinner and he was removing its remains, he suddenly broke forth :

"They tell me there has been a lady inquiring for your honour, a brazen hussy who must know where you had gone, and would take no denial."

"A lady?"

"Ay, I call her that, but I had my own doubts, like yourself. The town is full of them. But to come here, the baggage! I hope she has no—"

"Before I leave Oxford," I cried, "I shall be tempted to leave you without a bone in your body. Why did you not tell me this before?"

"Bad news should never be broken to a man fasting. What can a woman want here, but to lay shame on your honesty? I remember myself when Polly Boulter—"

"You will drive me mad," I cried. "Who was the lady?"

"I thank God I have no knowledge, but John



"A WOMAN WAS STANDING, CLAD IN A CLOAK THAT ALTOGETHER
CONCEALED HER PERSON"

Ostler has a fine acquaintance. He had speech with the wench in the courtyard, but if I were you I would have my foot in the stirrup before I inquired further."

I had some hope—faint and distant, it is true—that there was here some news of Melody Leigh, but all my enquiries were fruitless ; I could learn nothing or nothing to the purpose. The lady had left no name and no message, but had seemed disappointed when she learned that I was abroad. I was entirely at fault, for I had no acquaintance in the city, and my guesses only left me more in the dark than ever.

I remained within doors during the afternoon in the hope that I might learn something more, but she did not appear again, and in the evening I went forth, perplexed and disappointed, to take farewell of my friend Etherege, for whom I had conceived a warm liking. I stayed with him the best part of two hours, and returned home early, as I intended to set out at daybreak.

The evening was warm and still, and the house, usually filled with noisy guests, very quiet and deserted. I could not find my servant, and went up to my own room, which was all dark, the candles not being lighted though the curtains were not drawn. The door of my chamber lay open as I came up, but I closed it after me as I entered. My valise lay packed in the middle of the room, and the rest of my belongings lay confusedly here and there. In this litter I could nowhere find the tinder with which to strike a light, and I was inwardly swearing at Lockwood's stupidity when I heard a rustling sound between me and the window. I thought perhaps that Lockwood had fallen asleep in the dark, and without looking round I called to him angrily to bestir himself. But there was no answer to my order. The sound continued, and then I turned. I was never more astonished in my life. Between me and the window, framed, as it were, in the oblong of grey light, a woman was standing, clad in a cloak that altogether

concealed her person, and wearing, though I did not see this till a little afterwards, a vizard upon her face. My heart, I confess, gave a great leap; for a full minute I could not find speech. We both stood quite silent, I with my hand suspended in the very act of striking a light. Once or twice I tried to speak, and then I found my tongue, wondering what voice would answer me.

"To whom do I owe the honour of this visit?"

"A friend who comes to warn you of a danger—a great and pressing danger, which she learned yesterday. You are leaving Oxford."

"All the world seems to have learned that secret, madam; if it is one. May I ask from whom you had your information? But we cannot talk in the dark. Permit me—"

She sprang forward as though to arrest my hand.

"I have not come here willingly," she said, "but came because I could not help it. I have no name, nor would it profit you to learn it if I had. I came in kindness; we shall not meet again. You will not see my face."

"I am bound to observe your wishes," I answered, "if you come in friendship. I have too few friends to hurt any of them."

"Friends—you do not know your friends. There is one"—here she paused abruptly and seemed to hesitate—"one who professed himself your friend and is now plotting your destruction. I learnt his treachery myself with horror. I have heard you are going on a journey with letters of great importance. Your friend has learnt that secret—that and others—from a person high in favour with the king. You will be waylaid upon the road, and—I thought your friend a gallant gentleman, whose honour was beyond all speech. He is merely a common foot-pad, and a hired spy in the pay of Cromwell."

She spoke with great emotion, as though the words were wrung from her, but in a very low tone. It had already flashed upon me who the speaker was, though

she had succeeded admirably in disguising her voice and figure. I had now joined the links together and held the chain completed in my hand. Sir John's wild words about his daughter recurred to me. I could not guess how the revelation of her father's infamy had been made to the girl who had so honoured and trusted him, but however it had been made, the awakening must have been tragic and terrible. The breaking of the ties that bound them, so tender and deep, yet based on such strange foundations, must necessarily have carried with it much bitterness and anguish. Her voice told me that—it rang with indignation, it thrilled with grief. Moreover, I knew that her coming here was not the lightest part of the burden she was bearing, and I was at once anxious to shorten our interview and spare her further pain.

"I ask," I said, "for no names. I seek to know no more. But it may be some consolation for you to know that the person whom I think you mean, himself has warned me of my peril. Perhaps he cannot help himself."

"We will not speak of him. Mistrust him utterly. I had never thought to have ventured on an errand like this, but I can go now contented. Farewell, Mr. Duncombe, and forget your unknown friend."

"If I remember her it will always be with esteem and gratitude," I said, going before her to open the door.

She held out her hand to me standing on the threshold. I caught it and raised it to my lips.

While we stood in this attitude, Lockwood came up the staircase with a lighted candle and candlestick in his hand. He opened his eyes wide in astonishment and terror, and stood speechless there until she passed him on her way downward.

"The impudent baggage! the saucy quean!" he cried, "and to come to your chamber. It is no wonder that she hides her face, the—"

"You evil-minded vagabond," I cried, catching him

by the shoulder, "if I ever hear one ill word about that lady who is gone, I will beat the life out of you. She is an angel from heaven, and neither you nor I nor any man in Oxford is fit to tie her shoes."

He set down the candlestick in silence, but until his dying day he shook his head over the last night his master spent in Oxford. For myself, I am sure there never was a better woman, nor one more unfortunate, than Mary Death.

CHAPTER XV.

THE KNIGHT OF THE ROAD.

IT is not my purpose to describe my journey, or the daily incidents that happened on the way. I had left Oxford when the bells were tolling midnight, having resolved to start some hours earlier than had been arranged. In this way I may have escaped the toils that had been laid for me, for I rode through Wallingford and Reading, and then toward Guildford without hindrance or interruption. In the last town indeed, I had been stopped and questioned, the people being strong for the Parliament, but managed to get through with some difficulty and a plausible story. I travelled with great caution, avoiding the high-roads so far as I could, and the more frequented inns. I rode, so to speak, with a drawn sword in my hand, for I did not know where I should find an enemy, and my journey was therefore the slower and more arduous. It was necessary for me to feel my way as I went, and the history of my mischances and escapes would in themselves fill a larger volume than I now write. But there is one incident that remains fresh in my mind, and will never be forgotten.

I had ridden forth from Guildford in the fresh, sweet morning; the late spring had flushed the hedgerows and starred the spreading meadows; the air was living with a thousand woodland voices, and I felt in my own heart the warmth and pulse of spring. I had ridden all the morning in a pleasant reverie, the season's sweetness running in my veins and making music there. I had ridden through a straggling bye-

road, past a dozen sleepy hamlets, and suddenly came out again on the king's highway. A little farther on the road branched to the right and to the left, and here there was at that time a broken cross, and a little stream that ran bickering into a noble grove of oaks.

I dismounted here, and leading my horse to the cross, went to drink of the sweet, clear water. I lay down for a while in the cool shade, for the day was very warm, and watched the sportive play of light and shadow among the spreading branches. I had not been here very long when I heard the clattering of a horse upon the road, and rising to my feet I saw a horseman riding toward me, very gaily dressed and travelling leisurely. As he came nearer I saw the lace upon his coat was somewhat tarnished, but I never saw a finer horse.

"Another broken gentleman," I thought, "who has fallen upon evil times," and without apprehension I waited until he came up, standing with my hand upon the bridle, and watching him with interest. As he approached he took off his hat with a brave flourish, and then reined up his horse alongside my own. His eyes were very bold and bright, and he showed his white teeth as he laughed. He wore his hair very long, with a bunch of wild roses shining in the curls beneath his hat.

"I am glad to meet you, sir," he said, with a fine smile. "You are riding lightly like myself."

"But not so hard," I replied, seeing his horse in a lather.

"Perhaps you had not so much need," he answered lightly; "but now I am at leisure—my friends, I think, have dropped me, having taken all I had."

"I hope your loss has not been great."

"I can bear it with an easy mind—a valise that held the sole remains of all my fortune: item, two shirts, somewhat worn but serviceable; item, a pair of hose sadly shrunken; item, a pair of buckles that I bought a bargain from a Jew, and some other small

articles of personal adornment. It does not trouble a man like me to fall among thieves."

"I am glad," I said, "you bear your loss with equanimity."

"I daresay, sir, you would do the same."

"I hope I should."

"I am told the wise man only knows himself when he is tried and his philosophy is put to the test. I am grieved that my necessity should drive me to it—I must ask you for your purse."

Before I could stir a step he had very quietly presented a pistol at my head, and held it there, laughing the while. The movement took me altogether by surprise, for this was the last thing that I had expected, and I was completely at his mercy. The pistol was so near me that I could look into the muzzle, and that formed a grim contrast to the laughing eyes and lips above it.

"You do not like it," he cried, "but neither did I. My friends took all that I had in the name of the Lord, pox on them for it! I demand in the name of charity. I may leave you something if you be the man I take you for. Nay, you must not move your hand. That were quarrelling with Providence."

"What I have of my own you can have, since it seems you must: this is not mine—"

"And, therefore, the more easily parted with. We have nothing of our own. *Nudus intravi*. Mine was a trust, a sacred trust for drabs and dicers, vintners and tailors, which I discharged most faithfully. Now I must borrow on the security of this most excellent weapon that has never failed me yet."

"If you would hear me," I said.

"Sweet sir, we can reason together when our account is settled. 'Twere a poor time to pay for admittance when the play is over. The tragical comedy of the knight of the road and the honest traveller, whose hand is even now wandering toward his weapon, which must not be. Sure man was

never robbed more pleasantly. And now the ducats, if you please."

All the while he was talking his pistol looked me in the face with an imperative question to which I had no answer, and he seemed to enjoy my perplexity and chagrin. I saw there was nothing left but to surrender at discretion. I therefore pulled out my purse and handed it to him. The money with which the king had provided me was in my saddle-bag, and I hoped that I might escape with only the gold pieces in my purse.

He opened the purse and looked at the contents.

"When I was a student of Lincoln's Inn," he said, "I remember reading in Gaius or Justinian about two shipwrecked sailors clinging to a spar that would support but one. The wise Roman adjudged it right that the stronger should take the whole. But here is quite enough for two. You shall have not half, for that were hardly fair, but one-third for your sensible surrender, and I the other two. Or stay, I'll take a third and you the other, and I will play you for the rest. 'Tis months since I have heard the rattle of the bones."

He seemed quite serious, and put his hand in his pocket, looking, I think, for the dice in his fantastic humour, and having returned his pistol to the holster.

This gave me the opportunity that I had been eagerly looking for, and before he could recover from his surprise I had his horse by the bridle and my sword at his breast. My movement had been so rapid that I was completely master of the situation.

"'Tis now my turn," I said; "I will take my purse, if you please."

"Why, man, this is a more excellent jest than the other," he answered, not in the least put out, but smiling cheerfully. "I think my division was fair and reasonable. You cannot say I pressed you hard."

"I am in no humour for the jest, if this is one," I

said; "it savours too much of the gallows. My money, if you please."

"I cannot deny a request urged with so much insistence," he answered, handing my purse back with a laugh, "but I think you owe me something for the useful lesson I have taught you. Never trust appearances; so I wrote inspired by the master's birch when but a lad—and never fear an empty pistol. 'Tis but a player's weapon, and as harmless as himself. It has figured in tragedy, comedy, tragical comedy, and so forth, but never till now had it reaped such a golden harvest. A poor player's humour, sir."

"'Tis a humour," I answered, having recovered my composure, "that might have serious consequences."

"Pooh! man, what would you have? As well be hanged as starve, and better drink than either; *crede experto*, worshipful sir; I have tried them both. I have spent a slender patrimony and an excellent constitution in the study of the law. With tons of canary and other generous fluids I have striven to moisten the dry bones of Bracton and Fleta. I have trodden the boards with Sir Giles Overreach, and drawn the tears of the groundlings as Desdemona. All this was pleasant, but did not last—and wherefore? The answer now lies in your pocket, when it should lie in mine. Put money in thy purse, and but for that cursed weapon of yours I had done it."

"Not my money, if I can help it," I said, now enjoying the humour of this fantastic person. "I cannot afford to let you put your doctrines in practice at my charge."

"Men have paid as much for an excellent jest. Here I come riding with nothing in the world but this harmless plaything at which you start and shudder like an untrussed urchin, and hand me over a well-lined purse, and never see the humour of it. Jack Careless was an excellent player, but he proved a damnable highwayman."

"The worst in the world, and so much the better. Take the lesson to heart."

"Prithee, cease advising, or I shall cease to love thee. That turned me first into the primrose path, and left me there. But let us now return to common earth again. I have a long journey and must live by the way. That money that was yours, then mine, and now is yours again—shall we have the one gallant throw for it that I first proposed? It were an excellent jest."

"A most excellent jest, but hardly reasonable. But if two or three pieces—"

"You do not understand, sir. I am no beggar, and will take nothing as an alms. I have not yet come to whine at your doorstep, or to lead a dog by a string from change-house to change-house. I made you an offer."

"And I am about to make you another," I said, hardly able to keep my countenance. "I am going the road that you have come, and would buy your information at a fair price, and on fair terms. I am anxious about some friends upon the road."

"The devil you are!" he cried. "I have it now—a good figure, six feet, dark hair, dark eyes, and a dimple on the right cheek, a bay gelding with a white foot, if not changed. My dear sir, you already owe me double the sum that I returned to you for the four hours I spent with the snuffling knaves, who did you the honour to mistake my person for yours. Why, in the devil's name, did you not tell me you were riding in the good cause, a price upon your head, and Beelzebub and all his legions at your heels? D'ye think that Jack Careless has any part with the sour-faced, snivelling dogs who would have him whipped for a vagrant?"

"For whom do you take me?" I asked.

"Nay, nay," he answered good-humouredly. "I ask for no man's secrets, but I have my own thoughts. You shall have my story, and if your case is not the tag at the end of it I shall say no more, but bid you farewell. I was supping last night on some very thin beer and a plate of wholesome, if unassuming, por-

ridge, when a captain of dragoons (curse him for an unmannered rogue!) clapt me on the shoulder and told me I was the man he looked for. I answered that I was glad to hear it, and hoped it was to my very advantage. Then he basted me with sundry texts at the fire of Holy Writ, and proceeded to search my person, but found nothing save fourpence, a small case of strong water, and a stage copy of the Alchemist. My poor wardrobe fared no better, and then they held a council of war on me, which ended, after some time, in the confiscation of my effects and my being turned forth into the cold. I managed to effect a change of nags, however, and had somewhat the best of the bargain. I am glad to think my late Bucephalus will break the neck of the first trooper who mounts him."

"And what has this to do with me?"

"That is the very thing I should like to know. They are waiting for a gentleman who rides westward with papers for France of such face and figure as I have described to you—my own with minor differences, yours to a nicety. Would you meet my friends?"

"That were confession," I answered lightly, though in truth I saw my danger now near and pressing.

My companion for the first time became serious, and quite threw aside his jocular manner that he had never once lost.

"You imply, sir, that I am unworthy of your trust and confidence. Before God, I think I am; but I would have you know that John Careless was once a gentleman, and though an outcast and a vagabond has not lost his honour. What if for a mad whim I did play upon you? 'Twas an idle fancy caught in a foolish moment. I may have lost my reputation, but I have not lost my feelings. If you must know I ride from Dover Gaol to join the king, but do you think I will peach and cry haro? By G— you do me little justice."

His fine dark eyes, very wild and bright, were the

index of a troubled and fantastic mind, but I read in them the look of one sincere and much in earnest. I knew that the tale he told was probably true, and that being thus forewarned I had been saved from falling into the trap that was laid for me. I therefore, without making any confidence, made what amends I could for my former suspicions, and thanked him for his news.

"And now," I said, "what road am I to take?"

"The devil's in the choice," he answered readily; "the dragoons are out on both sides of you. Wit will not help you—my favourite goddess may. Here," he continued, drawing a copper coin from the depth of his capacious pocket, "is the last and dearest of a noble race now sadly shrunk and wasted. 'Tis head for right, and shield for left, and fortune on the spinning of the coin."

He threw it lightly into the air, and watched its whirling course with grave anxiety until it lighted fairly on the ground. Then he bent over it as though consulting an oracle.

"The voice of fate says take the right hand road, and faith, my slender wits had said the same myself."

During this time I had been standing in deep debate, and all at once a bold thought struck me which till now, strange to say, had not occurred to my mind. But now it flashed upon me that I had found the means to make my journey secure and easy, and to open up my way with hope of ultimate success. I therefore fell in with the humour of my reckless companion, and answered him in his own light and heedless spirit.

"You merely want the tripod and the laurel of Apollo. I cannot disobey the warning of the sybil. The right hand road it shall be."

"But—" he said.

"I see," I cried with a laugh, "you have no faith in your own prophetic power, but I am set upon the right hand road. Now I must be stirring. And first I have a word or two to say—'tis not advice—you

love not that—but prophecy, for in a minor way I too foresee the future. As a slender token of my thanks you will accept the loan of these five pieces until happier times, when you will pay me back with interest. You will fling your bones and bottle to the devil, whose servants they are, and give your sword and spirit to the king who wants such gallant fellows sorely now. You will outlive the past, and raise a new and better life upon the ruins of the old. You will—”

“Never forget your kindness,” he cried, seizing my hand, and the tears coming to his eyes. “’Tis the first word of hope and friendship I have heard for months, and so help me God, I’ll try to make your prophecy come true. You do not know what it is to lie down with beggars and consort with thieves, and all the time remember you were once a gentleman. I have been in hell, and your words may help me out of it.”

He wiped the tears from his eyes with his hand, and remained standing on the road looking after me when I had bidden him farewell. Long after I had left him he still stood there watching me as I went, and the last thing I saw of him was this solitary broken figure waving me his adieu, where he stood a mere speck on the broad high-road. He had done me a service, and I hope I had helped him, but at that time many such wrecks were drifting in the sea of broken fortunes, few to be recovered, most to disappear for ever.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAKES CLEAR THE UTILITY OF PRESERVING PAPERS.

I CAN yet recall the feelings with which I continued my journey—a sense of security resting upon the foolish self-confidence of youth, and of elation at danger to be faced and overcome. It must not be forgotten that I had yet but little experience of the vicissitudes of fortune, and that I was now at the zenith of my strength and hope. Yet it must not be supposed that I had grown reckless or improvident. I rode cautiously, and for ever on my guard. I felt, so to speak, every step that I made, and though I thought I had now less reason to fear the danger, I did not willingly court it.

The country folk were able to give me little news; their information was always vague, and never to be relied upon. The great game was going on in their midst, but they hardly noticed its movements. I was often driven miles out of my way by tidings that I ultimately found to be without foundation.

I had hitherto escaped easily, but now I knew that I was being waited for, and that my person was known to those who watched for me. There was only one man, however, that I feared; others I thought I had the means to meet. I knew that it was to Sir John Death that I owed this wakefulness on the part of those who sought to stay me. From him I now knew that I had much to fear, for he had the knowledge that would make the means I now meant to use of no avail. From the first he had been a spy upon

my actions. I knew now that he had sought to interrupt my first journey to Oxford, and I had now little doubt that it was through his means the pass had come into the hands of my friend. I thought now that I read his motive, if a single motive ever swayed that reckless but subtle spirit. He had conceived some liking for me, yet by casting suspicion upon my faith, had tried to alienate me from my friends. He had attacked my loyalty on the one side and my friendship on the other, and had nearly succeeded in destroying both. I had no doubt his purpose was to carry me into the company of those who used him as their tool, and this while he had a strong regard for me. No man whom I ever met was less moved by moral considerations; indeed, I think he was wholly blind to these, and acted only as it suited the hour and his whim. Myself he would have sacrificed and thought he was heaping kindness on me all the while, and now I knew that he would not spare me further than suited his own purpose; I had resisted his temptations and warnings, and shown him clearly that I was not to be moved or turned.

It was growing toward the afternoon when I left the luckless player, and a few miles farther on a village lay below in a sweet secluded hollow. The brown straw roofs peeped daintily through the green of elms, and white of apple blossoms—the loveliest natural sight I think the world can show, bringing ever to my mind a sense of rest and pastoral calm. A cloud of pigeons circled in the cool soft air; a distant chorus of children's voices fell on my ears like music. On the top of the hill I reined in my horse for a moment, drinking in the beauty of the scene, and then rode slowly on, seeing no sign of those for whom I looked.

The village was one long and straggling street, broken by little enclosed gardens, and nearly in the centre, tumbling down a steep decline where a stream ran brawling beneath a broken wooden bridge. As I rode through, there was hardly a sign of life; once a

white-capped woman looked through an open door and a hulking fellow straightened himself over his spade in a little garden plot.

At the end of the village was the alehouse, where I hoped to quench my thirst and perhaps to find a meal. As I came up, here also there was no sign of life. The door lay open, but there was no living being to be seen. I called once and again for some one to take my horse, but there was no answer. Despairing of evoking any response, I was about to dismount, and endeavour to compel an answer, when a man suddenly slipped through the door-way, and seized my horse by the bridle. It was done so quickly and yet so quietly, that I could scarce believe my eyes. My astonishment was very great, but was not greater than my chagrin. I had been taken before I could move a step. The steel cap, the buff coat, and bandoleers told their own plain story.

My first impulse was to drive my spurs into my horse's flank, and by mere force extricate myself if I could. But it was fortunate that I restrained that foolish impulse, and sat merely motionless and silent. My captor waited a moment to see what I would do.

"There are half-a-dozen muskets levelled on you now," he said, without any trace of excitement, and speaking quietly; "you had best dismount and come with me into the inn. We saw you riding over the hill, and have been waiting for you patiently. I saw that you did not expect us."

Glancing at the window, I perceived that he spoke no more than the truth, and in a moment I threw the reins upon the neck of my horse, and assumed the role that I had already made up my mind to play.

"What is the meaning of this?" I cried. "For whom or what do you take me?"

"All that I will answer presently; but, meanwhile, you must do as I say."

I said no more, but leaped from the saddle, and stood confronting him with well-simulated anger.

"Now, sirrah," I said, in a loud and angry voice, "I ask you the meaning of this. Do you know who I am, or on what and whose errand I ride to-day?"

My boldness had no effect upon him. He looked at me drily, and, without turning, made a sign to one of the soldiers who now stood in the doorway to take my horse.

"It does not need much wit to answer that. But you will answer one of mine when I have seen the papers that you carry. This has been a good day's work."

"The worst day's work that you have ever done in your life, fellow. The hand that wrote the papers that you speak of crushes where it falls, and see that it does not fall on you."

Without waiting for a reply, I strode into the ale-house, being now close to the door, and found myself in the midst of a dozen troopers, who had evidently been listening attentively to our colloquy. I read by their faces—it was plain to read—that they were surprised at my boldness, and I decided to strike again while the iron was at a white heat.

"Who is in charge here?" I said.

"Captain Lambert has ridden to Castleton," one of them answered, "and, in his absence, the sergeant commands the party."

"And you are the sergeant?" I cried to my captor, who had followed me into the room. "Then I ask again by what authority you stay one who rides on the business of the State?"

"These are fine words," he said; "but you cannot put me off with chaff like that. Now let me have the papers, or I shall be forced to take them. We have a rough way with us that you may not like."

"I do not care a groat for your ways," I cried. "The papers have been delivered to me to place in the hands of one I may not name to you. No other eye will see them till that is done. Are you Rupert's wolves or Goring's ruffians that you may cry 'halt' to one who carries this?"

I thrust my hand into my breast, and brought forth the pass that I had received from Cromwell, and bearing on it his great sprawling signature in bold characters. I held it out to the sergeant, carrying myself the while with a careless, swaggering air, like one that knows his strength and would use it.

"What is this?" he cried.

"It speaks its own language, and needs no commentary."

He took the paper from me with one doubtful look at my face, and then having opened it read it through without a word. But when he had finished his eyes continued fastened upon it. I saw the warm flush pass over his bronzed face, dyeing his neck and forehead a deep red. He never once suspected a trick; he fell immediately into the trap. The name of the great captain inspired him with fear. I think his eyes were fixed upon the signature; he saw nothing else. He felt that unwittingly he had laid his hand on one of the secret springs by which the great machine of State was moved, and he shrank back from the touch.

He returned me the paper without a word; his comrades watched us with interest and expectation.

"I warned you," I said, returning it to my breast, "that you should not interfere with me. I shall have a fine tale to tell the writer when I return with my answer. Is it your right to stop every messenger who rides on this service? Here is a fine story."

My indignation, well assumed as it was, took them all in, and especially the sergeant, who looked very humble and crestfallen.

"If you had said a word," he stammered.

"A word! a hundred, but you would not listen. For whom and what, I ask again, did you mistake me?"

"A messenger of the king who rides to Rye or Dover. I but followed my instructions, which were peremptory. A gentleman like yourself, mounted as

you are—in everything you agree with the description.”

“And a thousand others would do the same.”

“I could have taken an oath, were it not forbidden, that you were the man.”

“This,” I cried, placing my hand upon my breast, “is more to the purpose than your oath. Say no more. I will rest here for an hour; let my horse be taken to the stable, and see that he is well cared for. Then get me something to eat and drink, for I am both tired and hungry.”

I threw myself carelessly into a chair, loosened my sword belt, and flung my hat upon the table. My orders were obeyed with alacrity. I saw my horse led past the window, and I heard the sergeant's voice calling down the passage in a tone that admitted of no remonstrance. I was never more willingly served, and began to enjoy myself amazingly. I had carried things with such a high hand that I was not suspected for a moment. I was a person of importance in their eyes with regard to whom they had nearly made a serious mistake, and, therefore, every attention and apology was due to me. In a very short time an abundant meal was spread before me, the sergeant himself, who seemed to think a good deal of his authority, not disdaining to act as the master of ceremonies. He himself brought me a frothing tankard, and placed it before me, for which I did not even return him my thanks. I still kept up the appearance of one who feels himself insulted and ill-treated. I began and finished my meal almost without speaking a word, and then I pushed back my chair.

“I am afraid,” I said, “I shall not be able to wait for Captain Lambert. When does he arrive?”

“I expect him every instant. He is later than his wont; but the fellow may have passed the other road.”

“Very likely,” I answered; “I hope he may have found him there. He will be sorry to learn he missed

me here. I think I have met Captain Lambert with General Cromwell."

"That is likely, sir. Our captain is a favourite with the general—a godly man and a good soldier. I am sure he will be sorry."

I had no doubt of that, but I did not give further expression to my thought.

"Tell him," I said recklessly, "that the gentleman who passed this way is he who went to meet his bankrupt friend on the night that he remembers. I am sorry that he is not here to give him thanks for all his kindness then."

"I will deliver your message, but you may not have started before he returns."

This was a sudden spur. I rose to my feet and seized my hat.

"I travel post," I said, "and have already tarried far too long. The beer was excellent, the cheese as good, and now I will discharge my reckoning."

"You travel on the work of the State," he said, restraining me, "and not at your own charge. There is a long purse at Westminster that pays for this."

"I am glad to hear that. We will say nothing about the mistake you have made. 'Twas natural, and any man might have done the same. The next time we meet I hope you will not carry a halbert. Men get up rapidly nowadays."

He expressed his thanks for my good wishes, and insisted on following me to the stable, whither I myself went to look after my horse. Here was a large enclosed yard with a wide gateway, and in one end a covered shed where my horse had been stabled. I found that he had been carefully looked after. The saddle had been removed, and he was now quietly finishing his meal of oats. He whinnied joyfully as I entered.

The sergeant would have had him saddled for me, but he saw that I was determined upon doing that

for myself. I felt that I had already waited here too long. Up to this point I felt I had carried off everything successfully, and I was by no means anxious to wait for the return of the captain for very obvious reasons. The sergeant went out into the yard, and left me to complete my task alone.

Through the open door I could see him standing with arms akimbo, watching the flock of hens that was feeding near him. I had almost finished, and had nearly adjusted the last buckle when I suddenly stopped. My heart came into my mouth. In the still air I heard the steady galloping of a horse; then I turned again to my business with desperate haste. No sooner had I done than I heard the sound again that had ceased for a moment, and then Captain Lambert—the very man I had met—rode through the gateway. He came riding into the middle of the yard, and there reined in his horse that was all in a lather of foam. His face showed some eagerness and anxiety.

“Is there any news, sergeant?” he cried. “I am told on undoubted testimony the fellow we are looking for went this way.”

“If he did, sir, he is leagued with the evil one, for neither man nor child has passed since you left this morning that eye could see.”

“’Tis strange, very strange. We only missed him by a quarter of an hour at the cross-roads. There he met the player rogue who warned him, and who is now bound for Guildford gaol, where I hope they will open his mouth. I could not make him. Is there nothing to report?”

“Only that a gentleman travelling on pressing business for the Parliament hath been here for an hour.”

The captain was alert in an instant; he sat erect in his saddle.

“How?”

“I mistook him for the other, at which he was very angry—there was some resemblance. But he carries General Cromwell’s own order.”

"I trust to God you have not let him through your fingers."

"I could not be mistaken ; it was plain to read."

"You miserable dolt, you have ruined me. You have been duped and cozened, and the rogue is now laughing at your blind stupidity."

"There is still time, then, to change his tune ; he has not travelled far."

"What ?"

"He is there," and he pointed to the shed, "saddling his horse, and I think will answer you as he answered me."

But I knew that I could do anything but that. If I was to escape now, it must be by some other means ; my wit could not help me. There was not a moment to lose. I brought my horse to the door and drew my sword, for on that, if on anything, I must rely. Then I watched my enemies, waiting for the most favourable moment to move, and feeling that I never needed courage and resource more than at this moment. The two now stood in the centre of the yard. The captain was bending over his horse's neck and speaking to his sergeant in a tone so low that I could not hear a word. Then the latter ran swiftly across the yard and through the gateway. The former, glancing for an instant at the stable, threw his leg over the saddle and began to dismount.

This was the moment that I sought.

While his foot was still entangled in the stirrup, I was through the doorway and upon the back of my docile steed. I drove the spurs deep into his flanks, and at one bound I was abreast of Lambert, who had halted at the sudden appearance I made. My action was so sudden and unexpected that he hardly knew what to do. Then he called out at the top of his voice and made one wild catch at my bridle. But he missed that by an inch or two.

"Too late, my friend," I cried. "God save the king."

But I was yet far from being out of danger.

Hardly were the words out of my mouth, than two of the soldiers whom the sergeant had doubtless called, appeared in the gateway with their muskets in their hands. I dared not hesitate. I knew that in another minute the gateway would be completely blocked. I therefore set my gallant horse straight for it with a flourish of my sword. One of the troopers stepped aside to avoid the shock, but the other stubbornly stood his ground. My horse struck him with his flying hoofs; he went rolling to the ground. But the other, who had stepped to one side, leaped at me as I passed him, and caught my rein by the one hand, and me by the other. He did not drag me from my saddle, nor bring me to a stand, but he very perceptibly checked my speed.

"Let go, fool!" I shouted. "Let go your hold, or—"

But he clung to me like a vice; I could not shake him off. Then I set my teeth fast, and raised my sword. He looked up a moment, and saw the gleaming blade above his head. But he never loosed his hold; he clung only the more tenaciously. I dared not spare him if I would. He gave a loud cry as of one rather enraged and disappointed than in pain; his hands relaxed slowly, and he fell to the ground.

All this that has taken some time to tell took place inside the beating of a minute, but it seemed a lifetime to me. The road was now clear before me, but the troopers had poured out of the inn, and I saw the brown barrels levelled at me. I turned upon my saddle, and waved my hand defiantly.

"God save the king!" I cried, a mocking cry of triumph. Then I heard the bullets singing round me, and my horse gave one little start in his long stride. But he did not slacken his speed. Again I heard the rattle of the muskets, but I was already climbing the steep declivity that rose from the stream. I knew that I was safe for the present.

Lambert had thrown himself upon his horse and followed me for some distance, but while his animal

was tired and jaded, mine was fresh and full of spirit. He saw that pursuit was useless, and had already stopped before I reached the top of the hill. I waved him a joyous farewell, and continued my journey with a light and thankful spirit.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRAP IS BAITED.

THE house that I sought in the town of Rye stood near the corner of the street, receding a little from its neighbours, as though ashamed of its dilapidated front and bankrupt roof. It was no longer venerable, but disreputable in its age, and no care had been taken to repair the ravages of time. Armorial bearings had been sculptured over the door, but these had been obliterated, and in their place a rusty iron rod held a rude mortar and pestle. The upper windows were closed with shutters, and the lower were so festooned with cobwebs and darkened with dust, that at first I thought the house was uninhabited. But as I came up, a man in a nightcap and a threadbare suit of black, came to the door, and looked cautiously up and down. He did not seem to recognise me at first, or if he did his eyes seemed quite oblivious to my presence.

"Good-day, sir," I called out, not for a moment dreaming that this was the person I sought.

He started as if about to retreat, and then looked at me timidly, but he did not speak.

"Where shall I find Mr. Ephraim Ussher?"

"Hush!" he cried in a tone of alarm; "my neighbours will hear you. It is still light, and their eyesight is better than mine. You are come—" he hesitated.

"From a friend in the country," I answered, as had been agreed upon; "the cargo is ready."

All the while he had stood glancing uneasily about him, and now looked at me.

"I know, I know," he answered. "I am the man you want, but this is dangerous, very dangerous. Ride on, friend, and turn to the left. There you will find a lane and a stable at the end thereof. I shall join you there; you must be very cautious."

With another hasty glance he disappeared within, closed the door behind him, and left me standing there. I had immediately conceived a strong antipathy to my friend Ephraim, which I could not put into words. His small and crafty eyes were too near one another; his lips were thin and wavering; his manner was too timid and obsequious. But it was not my duty to find fault with the agent who had been selected; it was only my duty to carry out my instructions, which were clear and explicit. From them I could deviate only in the presence of extreme danger, but I came to the conclusion that Master Ussher must be treated tenderly and watched carefully.

I followed the instructions which he gave me, and had no difficulty in finding my way. The lane ran by a sudden turn to the rear of the house, and ended in a small stable, where Ussher himself was waiting to receive me.

"You are sure you were not seen or followed?" he said. "I am not suspected, but we must be careful, very careful. I know not why I am brought into these perils—an old man, a peaceful man."

"You know your own reasons," I answered, looking at him narrowly. "I did not inquire, but I suppose like myself you are paid for what you do."

He held out his hands expressively.

"Niggardly, niggardly. What could recompense me for the risks I run? Poverty, sir, poverty tempts a man to do many things—a crown or two, more or less. Do they pay you well?"

I thought I had discovered the key to his character.

"A little in hand," I answered carelessly; "the remainder when we ship the cargo. I think our

master will be found liberal when our work is finished."

"I have had promises, golden promises, but one cannot live on words. They tell me the—" here he lowered his voice to a mere whisper—"the cause we know of is going badly."

"Tut," I answered, "do you think they will kick the crown into the street like an old shoe? And what does it matter to you and me so long as they pay us well?"

He lifted his eyes to mine with one swift inquiring look, but my countenance was altogether impassive and he read nothing there.

"When I am paid by a note of hand," he answered shortly, "I like to think I have a good security. But you must tell me nothing," he continued cunningly; "you are only my lodger from the country, and pay me for your board."

"I heard nothing of that," I said.

"Nay, but it will make us more secure."

"That will depend on your treatment of me," I said, smiling inwardly.

"You must expect no luxuries while you are in my house—plain and simple fare, but wholesome, very wholesome. How long will you be here?"

I was about to answer that my stay was indefinite—that it might be an hour or a week—when something in the man's voice—I could not tell what—constrained me to answer guardedly.

"This is Monday," I said; "by Saturday at least I hope to be aboard."

"Saturday, h'm! I shall not sleep till Saturday. By the way, what am I to call you?"

"The Ghost," I answered, looking at him seriously. "I shall only walk by night; by day I shall remain invisible. You do not like my name?"

"When you have stabled your horse," he answered, "you will find hay in the loft above. Be sparing of it, for I never remember it dearer, and when you have

finished you can follow me in to the house. Sextus is getting ready my supper, and his own."

He left me and went shuffling across the passage, looking from this side to that over his shoulder as he went. Money has bought this fellow, I thought, as I climbed up the ladder into the hay loft, and he would sell himself again in the best market. I shall have to watch him like a hawk. When a rogue thinks he is being badly paid for his honest service, he has already taken the first step to another piece of villainy. When he looked at me he was appraising me and wondering how much I would fetch. Take care, Master Ussher, you will find me watchful.

Before I followed my host into the house, I again walked down the lane, and, so far as I could in the twilight, I noticed the entrances and exits, thinking that perhaps it might be serviceable to know them if occasion required. This being done, I entered the house and came into a sort of kitchen which was also used as a living room. A small fire of wood was burning on the hearth. A lank lad, with a vacant look, bent over this frying some fish in a pan, and Ussher stood over him watching with eager interest, and rubbing his lean hands composedly together.

"There is no fish like the eel; it fries in its own fat. Gently, Sextus, gently. Be careful of the good food. Waste not, want not, is a lesson you will not learn. There are three mouths to feed now, and one of them, nay, two, for you also are a glutton, Sextus, is cursed with a tremendous appetite. We shall have to let more blood, more blood, Sextus."

At this the lad gave a start, and looking up, saw me standing watching him. A look of terror overspread his face; he turned suddenly, and the pan and its unsavoury contents were scattered over the hearth. The old man brought his hand down heavily on the lad's shoulder, and then, hurriedly kneeling down, began to gather up the fragments out of the ashes. All this time he called him a hundred opprobrious names, this small mischance seeming to have

driven him almost distracted. Then I stepped forward and interfered.

"The lad was not to blame," I said ; "'twas you and I who frightened him. Be good enough to show me my room, and leave him to finish. I have a word or two to say to you."

"This is the third time he has done this in the month. Fish and flesh cost money, sir, and I cannot afford to waste them. You would not, perhaps, like to go without your supper?"

"I will provide for myself," I said, hardly repressing a shudder. "Now show me to my room, and let your boy bring up my valise."

"When I return he will do that. In the meantime, he must look after the supper. Now be careful."

He held up his long forefinger warningly, at which I could see the lad shrank as if he had been struck, and lifting the one poor candle that stood upon the table, led the way upstairs.

The house was very roomy and spacious, the hall being tiled and panelled in black oak, and the broad stone staircase being protected by a handsome balustrade richly carved.

"This has been a fine house," I remarked, looking in surprise at the fretted ceiling and the fine woodwork, now utterly neglected. It had seen better days. "I should like to know its history."

"A common tale. Extravagance breeds penury—that is enough for me. Here is your room ; I hope you will find it comfortable. It has a fine prospect with the morning sun. The furniture is as it was when I first came here, but young men want no luxuries."

"It is infernally musty," I cried.

He set down the candle, that gave forth only a faint glimmer in the great room, but showed me so much that I was struck to the heart by the dreary and cheerless place. A great bed, with rich curtains, was in one corner ; a few straight-backed chairs, black

with age, were ranged against the wall, and a table, that hung doubtfully on three legs, stood in the middle of the room. There was no other furniture. The floor was uncarpeted and the windows uncurtained. Of these there were two, one looking out upon the street in front, and the other opening upon the rere, and the faint light of the candle flickered in the draught between them.

"I want no luxuries," I cried, "nor am I likely to find them here; but I have to lodge with you a week and must live. It is necessary for us to come to an understanding. What I want, your lad can purchase for me, and you shall have your profit in the dealings. Honest men must live, but you will leave me free to do as I will, and go and come as I please. In addition to what my principals pay you, I will add something handsome when I leave; but remember, not till then. Now I must have a fire."

"What!" he cried, lifting his hands in astonishment, "a fire in May?"

"That is contrary to our bargain," I answered; "I must have absolute freedom. You may send your boy to me; I suppose I can trust him to say nothing?"

"A rat-trap—what goes in there never comes out. I have never heard the like—a fire in May!"

"And moreover," I added, disregarding his interjection, "there must be no prying into my affairs—absolutely none. I go and come, and you ask no questions. You have been trusted, and I must trust you too; but this may be a hanging matter if you are discovered. You would dislike that?"

"I shall never sleep again," he cried despairingly. "This is the second time that I have put myself into the dog's mouth. If I escape now, I will never tempt Providence again."

"If you follow my directions," I said, "you will run little risk; if not, you will find me a more dangerous enemy than those you fear outside. I shall be a good friend if you use me well; but one word, a whisper, a look, and you will regret the day I entered

your house. Now send me your servant, and I will tell him what I want."

He turned toward the door with uncertain steps, muttering as he went that I should find him faithful, and that he would serve me to his utmost; but I already mistrusted and feared him. I had no reason to suppose that he meant to betray me, but instinct put me upon my guard, that and my natural caution.

I made a hasty examination of the room. I could find no trace of an opening in the panels of the wainscot, though I traversed the entire chamber. Then I went to the windows and opened the shutters cautiously. The night was light, and the sky was full of stars, with a fair moon. The window in the rear looked out upon the tiles of a low roof that ran to the end of the lane of which I have spoken, and of this window I examined the fastenings carefully. They were worn with age and covered with rust, but I found that with a little trouble I could open them. Being satisfied with my search, I sat down and waited until the lad Sextus made his appearance, which he did in a short time. Whether from ill-usage or some other cause, his face was drawn and pinched, and his eyes were open and startled like those of a hunted animal. His long, lank hair fell about his face in a tangled mass; his hose were far too short for long and bony legs, and his hands had a trick of playing nervously with his lips.

I spoke to him kindly, for I thought he might prove useful as a friend, but I was unable at first to evoke any response from him. For a time I thought he failed to take in clearly the meaning of my words, but in this, however, I was entirely mistaken, for I found him later very bright and intelligent when his master was not present. I repeated my orders several times, until I saw that he understood them, and then I thrust a gold piece into his hand.

"That is for yourself, altogether for yourself," I said, "and you can spend it as you please. We shall be excellent friends, but you must let me know who

goes out and in ; and no one must know that I live here. You understand me ? ”

He nodded his head vigorously, with a shrewder look in his vacant eyes than I had seen before, and all the time lovingly caressing the coin I had given him.

“ The gentleman who was here last night gave me nothing,” he said, “ but would have shut me up in the cellar. I heard him tell the master that.”

“ You had a visitor then ? ”

I walked over to the door quietly, and threw it open. The corridor was quite dark, but not too dark to see Master Ussher a few paces away, making swiftly for the staircase. I again closed the door, knowing that I had just got rid of a listener, and wondering why Ussher should have taken the trouble so early to play the spy.

“ You had a visitor,” I continued. “ He would have treated you badly ? ”

“ He frightened me, and I know he frightened the master, for I heard him calling out in the night. His sword was longer than your honour’s, but I like this better.”

I saw that he was attracted by the shining hilt that lay on the table, like a child by a bright plaything. He went over and touched it inquiringly with his hand.

“ Has this ever killed a man ? The colonel—”

“ The colonel,” I cried ; “ what was his name ? ”

“ I do not know ; my master called him that. But I am sure he is a good soldier. He swears beautifully.”

“ Did you hear what they talked about ? ” I asked carelessly, but with a rising feeling of wonder and suspicion.

“ No, sir. I brought him a pint of wine from the Mermaid.”

“ Did you hear nothing ? ”

“ He said that he had a market for my master’s fish, but—”

"Your master has no fish to sell? You are a clever lad, Sextus. Now, listen to me carefully. You will have five fine golden pieces when you bring me word again when you have seen this gentleman, and tell me where he is to be found. You will let me know when your master goes out, and everyone who visits him. And, above all, you must say nothing, neither to your master nor to any other."

He consented very readily, seeming greatly flattered that I should take him so far into my confidence. But indeed I now felt that I needed all the help that I could borrow. I could not leave this house without abandoning my mission, for here only could I find the means of embarking for France—and here I now knew that I was already in a trap. Ussher had sold his secret—that did not surprise me—but it was now of vital importance to me that I should know how to treat him.

I sat down to consider the situation and what precautions I could adopt to ward off the danger. At first I could think of nothing. I was alone in a town where I had no friends; I was known to be in this house, and to carry my precious papers with me. At any moment I might expect to be arrested. Even now my enemies might be standing on the threshold.

"If heaven help me, they will have my life before this," I said, drawing forth the silken envelope in which my packet was enclosed, and placing it on the table. Then a thought struck me, firstly—I must find a place of concealment for my papers, whereby my arrest would profit my captors nothing; and secondly—I must endeavour to gain time till my friend's arrival. No sooner had the thought struck me than I proceeded to put it into execution. Searching along the wall of the chamber, I found a plank in the floor that I could move with the end of my sword. I lifted this, and discovered a very cunning hiding-place for the papers. This being completed, I replaced the board carefully, and when that was done I thought my work defied discovery.

A great weight was lifted from my mind; henceforth I had only to regard my own safety.

Before I had begun my task I had locked the door, and hung my cloak over it, for I knew that Ussher's eyes would now be upon me continually. I had hardly finished when the lad Sextus returned with the necessaries I had ordered, and I left him kindling my fire in the draughty hearth when I again went downstairs to look for his master.

Ussher was seated at his supper in the kitchen when I came in, and gave a sudden start when he saw me.

"I hope there is nothing that does not please you?" he said.

"I am perfectly satisfied," I answered; "but there is one thing I had forgotten to say. When my friend arrives you will bring him to me at once. You who have been so far trusted may be trusted further." I here lowered my voice as though I feared I might be overheard, and at the moment almost despised myself for my duplicity. "He carries precious papers which I must carry farther. You understand?"

"No, I thought that you—"

He stopped short, and looked at me doubtfully:

"And others thought the same," I answered boldly, "but that was part of the plan. While they laid the dogs on my track, he is travelling quietly."

He laughed a thin, quavering laugh, looking at me the while very cunningly. I should not like to write down the thoughts I had as I looked at him.

"It was a happy thought," he said, "and does you credit. Oh! we will baffle them yet. And you will tell them that sent you how I tried to serve you. I am a poor man, very poor, but honest. I wonder at what time your friend is likely to arrive."

"You must not expect him for a week, at least. You see it was well that I, who was already known, should carry the pack at my heels."

"A week is a long time."

"Your score will be still longer," I said with a laugh.

"It is but reasonable that you should pay me well. But who will pay me for my peace of mind?"

"You can put down your own charges for that. I know you have a tender conscience."

I left the old hypocrite with a feeling of disgust, and returned to my own chamber, where a fire was already burning brightly. I thought that I had now gained some days' delay, for I had no doubt that all I had said would be duly made known. I felt certain also that it would never be suspected I was acting a part in the confidence I had vouchsafed, and while I should still be watched, no move would be made till my friend arrived. I was satisfied that I had acted wisely, and that I had still some days to prepare my plans for my future action.

I shall never forget the days that seemed to be years which I spent in that desolate house. The hours moved in fetters, and the gloom and silence fell upon me like a cloud. I never left my room during the day, but traversed the apartment like an untamed animal in captivity. On the second night I ventured abroad, but I had so narrow an escape at the hands of the watch, I determined not to run the risk again. Ussher paid me a visit once or twice, but I grew so sick of his stealthy tread and furtive glance that my manner showed him he was not wanted. There was nothing to be gained by conciliation, and I treated him with scanty courtesy.

I should have found my lot still more unbearable but for the lad Sextus. The faithful fellow, dull-witted as he was, conceived a great affection for me, and whenever he was able to escape the harsh surveillance of his master, found some trivial duty to perform in my room. His mind seemed to have been suddenly arrested in its growth. He possessed the cunning of a precocious childhood, but was for the most part like a child, full of suspicion and wonder. My advent was like the glimpse of an unknown world for him, and he never tired of putting questions which

I took a pleasure in answering. He would stand for long minutes together, his fingers playing with his lips, and his dull eyes wide open, staring at me without a word. But one thing he seemed instinctively to understand, and how it came about I do not know, that between his master and myself was a secret hostility, in which he sought to take a part. I was unwilling to use him, but I could not help it. The issues were of too great moment to allow my scruples to stand in the way. But while I used him as my eyes and ears, I endeavoured to do this without betraying the fact that I used him, though I do not think that I succeeded. I learned all that took place in the house, and was now certain that I was in no danger for some time.

The night following my arrival, Ussher had had another interview with his mysterious friend, but so far as I could learn, had not seen him again. This was only what I expected; they were unwilling to run any risk of awakening my suspicions, but kept a strict watch within and without. They waited for the moment when they could take all the game together. I hoped they would find it more difficult than they imagined.

On the last night of my stay in this desolate house, Sextus came hurriedly into my room and closed the door softly after him. I saw by his face that he carried news of moment. His breath came so fast that for a time he could not speak; his eyes shone with excitement. He stood for a moment with both his hands upon his chest, striving to calm his labouring breath.

"What is the matter?" I cried, starting up and thinking that my enemies were at the door.

"There is another of them," he answered, "shut up with my master; he came through the lane. They did not think I saw him."

"Is it the same who was here before?"

"No, sir, I am sure that it isn't. This is a smaller

man, with no hair upon his face, and talks more softly. I could scarce hear him."

"And where is he now?"

"Shut up with my master in the room below."

"He may have business of his own."

"I heard him ask if you were still within."

Here was proof conclusive. I resolved to act at once.

"I must see this man, Sextus," I cried, "and I must have your help. Leave my door open, and when you hear them move, throw open the window in front. I think he will then return the way he came. I would not have him see me. Should your master call you, do not answer. After a while unbolt the door in front, for I shall return that way."

The lad fell in with my meaning at once, and I hastily caught up my sword and stole noiselessly down the stairs. There was no light in the kitchen but the red glow of a few dying embers, showing where the fire had burned. I stumbled through, and going out, found a dark corner near the door, where I concealed myself. It was a bright night, but I had no fear of discovery. Here I waited patiently, hoping that Sextus would follow my instructions. Ten minutes elapsed, then a quarter of an hour, and still they did not come.

"Here," I thought, "is fine work for a gentleman, to lie like an assassin waiting for a miser and a spy. This is a rare trade, with little hope at the end of it. There is little honour in this; but I will not be taken like a woodcock in a springe if I can help it."

I was now like one set with his back to the wall making a fight for his life, and resolute not to move an inch. Plan or method I had none, but only a hope that I might find an ultimate way. I might, indeed, have abandoned my design and provided for my own safety. But two things made against this, each of which was sufficient to stay me. I could not return to Oxford, and I could not allow my friend, whoever he might be, to walk unsuspectingly into

the trap from which I had escaped. This I was resolved should not happen

I was beginning to think there would never be an end to my waiting, when I heard the sound of an opening door and stealthy footsteps. I crept back more closely into my place of concealment.

"All goes well, Master Ussher. You will not have much longer to wait."

The voice, though low, was bland and pleasant.

"I go in terror of my life," Ussher answered. "Soft speech will not catch him. He would cut my throat if he but dreamt of this. Alas, alas, I am an old man—"

"You have told me that before," the other answered, pleasantly. "You must be passably well to do in the world being paid on both sides. Running with the hare, and hunting with the hounds—you are a sly rogue, Master Ussher."

"I am a poor man, sir, and am doing you a service at great risk—at very great risk. You do not know what a mad rascal I have in my house."

"Keep him there at your peril, and at the first word bring me news. You know where to find me. Good-night."

The stranger passed down the lane, almost brushing me as he went, and Ussher returned within and closed the door.

I waited until the man I watched had reached the end of the lane, and then I followed him rapidly. He turned to the left, and went slowly down the street. Then he was joined by a companion, who was evidently on the watch for him, and they went on together arm-in-arm. I still continued to follow them, but in my fear of discovery could not come near enough to hear what they said, or to see their faces. When they reached the end of the street they stood talking for a long time, and I heard the soft and pleasant laugh of the man I had seen in Ussher's house frequently repeated. Then they separated, the stranger turning abruptly, and walking rapidly in my

direction. For a moment I thought that I had been discovered, but he passed without taking any notice of me.

I did not need to see his face—there was no need for that. As he strode down the footpath I heard him humming the words I remembered so well—

“The lime is wet, and the snare is set,
But the little brown bird sings merrily, oh.”

It was Colonel Death.

I stood confounded, looking after him till he passed quite out of my view. I knew now that the time had come for the springing of the trap.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHOWS HOW THE TRAP WAS SPRUNG.

I SAY that I was utterly confounded, but I did not therefore sit down to despair. I had already the advantage that while my enemies thought I remained in blind security, and that they could take me when they pleased (as indeed seemed the case), I foresaw their plans and could take my measures accordingly. Moreover, Colonel Death's presence rather encouraged and heartened than depressed me. I knew now that this was his scheme, and that these were his agents. From the first moment almost that we had met he had given me credit for courage and mere audacity, but had ever treated me as one devoid of insight and clear understanding. In the conflict of wits he looked upon me as a mean and unequal opponent—one whose youth and inexperience left him an easy prey. And I had the hope now that, presuming upon my supposed weakness, he would again betray himself into a false step by which I might profit.

I drew my cloak about my face and walked up and down in the darkness, turning over the whole matter in my mind. Then I directed my steps towards my lodging, and passed the house, walking on the other side of the way, but no watch seemed to have been set, for there was no one in sight. I crossed the road and found the door fastened so that I could not open it. This was exactly what I had desired to avoid. I did not doubt but that Sextus had either been unable to follow or had misunderstood my directions. But there was no help for it. I accordingly knocked

softly, and then waited to listen. Hardly had I finished than I heard the sound of swift footsteps in the hall—the footsteps of one running, and the catch of a labouring breath. Here, I thought, is Sextus, but where is his master that he runs so boldly? I received the answer in a moment. The door was hardly opened, when the lad in a fit of wild excitement caught me in his arms.

"The gentleman is come, sir," he cried, "and my master is gone abroad."

"How long is he gone?" I said, feeling that now the crisis had come.

"But two minutes."

"What did he say? Did he say anything?"

"That I was not to go upstairs, and should open when he knocked. The gentleman is in your room."

"Keep your master while you can," I cried, "but not too long."

I left the lad closing the door, and rushed up the staircase. My visitor was standing on the hearth, his back toward me and his face bent toward the fire. I had got into the middle of the room in my haste before he turned. Then he wheeled round abruptly, and we stood face to face.

"My God," I cried in my astonishment, "Percival Leigh!"

"Yes, sir," he answered, his surprise depicted in his face, "that is my name. I had not hoped to meet you here. My business—"

"Is mine—the queen and France. You have come with news for me."

"That seems to be the case," he answered; "you have the words. But the knowledge that I have of you prevents my going further. You know my meaning."

"This is no time for words," I cried; "our enemies are at the door."

"When I saw you here I had already supposed as much."

"This is madness," I answered, quite distracted.

"My hands are as clean as yours, my honour as unstained. But now we cannot stand to talk. Ussher has betrayed us ; the house is watched, and even now he has gone to tell them of your coming. Think what you will, but help me. There is not one precious moment to lose."

There was, I think, something in my words and manner that touched him, for he looked at me curiously. He seemed to me perplexed and debating with himself ; by a swift sympathy I knew exactly what was passing in his mind. Ancient faith and secret doubt based on evidence that seemed to him too clear to question, my desperate earnestness and the knowledge that there could be no profit in my now acting this part—all these staggered and made him pause, uncertain what to do.

"I dare not trust you," he said doubtfully.

"I do not ask you for your trust. Think me what you will. You have not chosen me, nor have I chosen you, but that does not put a stop to my doing what I think my duty. Knowing that I was betrayed, I have yet waited for you some days, and whether you trust me or not I must find my way to France. The king has trusted me."

I did not wait for his answer, knowing that I had not a minute to lose, but hastily brought my packet from its hiding-place, and in silence made my hurried preparations for quitting the place. This, you may imagine, took me little time to do, Leigh standing the while watching me under his brows.

All the time I was listening for the sound of my enemies at the door and on the stairs ; but I had finished, and as yet all was silent. Then, being quite ready, I turned to my companion.

"Now," I said, "whether you are with me or against me, I will try to serve the king. What way am I to take ?"

"Before God," he cried, "I think that you are in earnest."

"You will have reason to know that before I am

an hour older, if I am not much mistaken. When you have put me on board, your business is done, but I fear you may not find that easy now. But on board I must get."

"Whether I am right or wrong, and God knows I do not yet know which, I am with you. The boat is waiting in the river; we have but to call twice, and—"

"First find ourselves there," I added, going over to the window, and carefully withdrawing the shutter a little. The moon had now broken forth clear and bright, and I could see some distance along the silent street. But I saw more than the sleeping houses, the dimly flickering lamps, and the broken patches of moonlight—a little band of men coming swiftly down the opposite way, and courting the shadows as they came. I called softly to Leigh to join me where I stood, and pointed to the troop.

"The precious minutes we have lost have borne their fruit. You see it there."

I did not mean to reproach him—it was with no such intent that I spoke these words—but my words cut him like a knife.

"My God!" he cried, "we are lost, and I have ruined you."

"They think us a pair of fools," I said, "to walk into their arms. We used to know how to stop all the earths better than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I have seen you do it in Fir Tree Gorse. Sir John, Sir John, you have still something to learn."

Leigh looked at me in wonder, supposing that I was taking leave of my wits, and then there happened almost what I had expected. While the men on the other side withdrew more closely into the shadow, one of them—and I recognised him in the moonlight—crossed the road and knocked loudly at the door. The sound awoke the echoes of the silent street and empty house. I felt myself strangely moved by the sudden alarm.

"Here is a late visitor," I said, "and you must

leave me to receive him. What we want now is time."

"For what purpose?" Leigh asked doubtfully.

"Providence has provided a window in the rere which our friends have quite forgotten. A long drop will reach the tiles. This is the earth they have not stopped, and I think they mean to give us time. This gentleman will be here immediately; if he found us gone, the alarm would be raised, and we should be caught before we reached the ground. I have thought of this a long time since I feared this might happen. The person who is even now admitted (for I hear the door being opened) is coming here to visit us—I trust alone. He must be overpowered, and while his men are waiting for the signal, in the meantime we have disappeared."

"I think that I can compass that," Leigh said, drawing his rapier, and going toward the door of the chamber.

"You will ruin all," I cried, catching his arm. "There must not be a sound—a whisper—of alarm. Our safety depends upon our perfect silence. Conceal yourself there," and I pointed toward the curtain; "if I need your help I shall call for you."

There is something in danger when we have time to face it, that clears the mind while it stirs the blood. Leigh took his place behind the curtain, and I turned coolly to await the arrival of my late visitor. I heard his footsteps on the stairs; I listened, and knew that he was alone. He did not pause at the door, but pushed it open and entered the room. As I had already known, it was Colonel Death himself.

Seeing me standing alone, he looked round the room with an expression of surprise that became one of alarm.

"You need not trouble, Colonel Death," I said very coldly. "I give you my word of honour that my friend will join us presently."

"In this room and alone?"

"Here and alone."

"'Tis well said, my prince of cavaliers. I am easy in my mind; your word is absolute crystal and adamant. I have run you down after a long chase, and yet you do not seem surprised."

"I expected a friendly visit. I have known for some days that you were in Rye, and I saw you this evening."

"The devil you did. Had I been in your place I had been off *sine impedimentis*. But your wits will never make a man of you; not that you did not play a sorry trick on Lambert. I should have liked to see the rogue's sour visage—but you have no sense, not a doit or drachm. Had you followed my advice, instead of hiding here with the certainty of a gaol before you, and God knows what to follow, you had been on the high road to fortune—a chief ruler in the synagogue with fat pickings by-and-by. John Death would have been your friend."

I bowed.

"Oh, you can smile, sir, but it is true."

"You have proved an excellent friend with your lying letters and your secret slanders. Call up your fellows and let us get done with this."

"You might have had better and worse. It is not my fault that I am here. My duty was to see that the letters you carry did not leave the kingdom whatever hand held them. I warned you; I might as well have whistled to the wind. You took the button of the foils and would not have my friendship. My honour—"

"Your honour!"

"Yes, sir, my honour. Cannot I also use the word? The mask of the wise, the pride of the weak, the dream of the fool, a gewgaw, a plaything, an empty nothing that boys like yourself grasp at to profit men like me. I understand the word, and here my honour means as many guineas as the papers are worth that you carry. My honour was concerned that I should lay my hands upon them, and I have done it now."

"You could almost touch them where you stand," I said, laying my hand upon my breast.

His eyes flashed, and he moved a step forward.

"Not so fast ; we are alone here."

"There are a dozen stout fellows below stairs who will prove to the contrary at the first note of call. You will not cheat me as you cheated Lambert. I must have the papers, Duncombe. I have been waiting for them for a month."

"If you must have them, I can say nothing ; but what about myself and my friend ? Must we also go with the papers ?"

"Egad, I had not thought of that. I think that one of you will be enough. I might find a way to wink and cry 'nod,' while the other gets to cover."

"That might be equally objectionable to Sir Percival Leigh and myself."

"Is Leigh the man ? I could not learn his name. I shall keep him now that he is in my hands at all hazards. Surely here is a vouchsafing of Providence, a crowning mercy, a great deliverance. Upon my soul, I am delighted to hear it. I owe that Philistine more than I can pay him to-night."

"And what can I say, Colonel Death, when I return alone and empty-handed ?"

"Say ? what should you say ? Tell them that a gentleman of excellent birth and lineage, whom his majesty banished from the precincts of his court, lest his friends' eyes might be offended, has paid himself for all his slights, and—tell them the broken gamester they thought unfit to run as a lackey has helped to bring the kingdom down about their ears and given to the world the secrets of Henrietta and her para—"

"Nay, sir," I answered gravely, interrupting him, "I cannot say that."

"And wherefore not, most excellent Discretion ?"

"Because I should not speak the truth."

"True as that grass grows and water runs."

"I think not. There is something first."

"And what is that ?"

"This," I cried softly, suddenly presenting my pistol at his head. "If you move a step or speak a word, I will blow out your brains, Sir John. Surely the Philistines are now upon you."

He had advanced quite close to me, his face ablaze with passion, when the barrel of my weapon almost touched his forehead. In a moment, when he saw how completely he was in my power, his face became ashy, and his hands dropped helplessly to his side. Had he moved or called out I should certainly have kept my word. He stood staring at me like one thunderstruck, and muttered some words the sense of which I could not catch.

"And now, Colonel Death," I said, "I keep my word. My friend is here, and as you see alone."

Leigh stepped forth from his place of concealment.

"We must bind this rascal securely," he said, "before we go further."

I almost pitied Sir John at that moment. I never saw any one present an appearance so utterly crestfallen and downcast. He had a minute before been riding on a wave of expectant triumph, and now he lay stranded, a mere log. It was so sudden, so unexpected. He had believed himself entirely master of circumstances, and now the situation had been completely changed. Where he had been supreme, he was entirely helpless; where he had been carrying off everything, he saw the spoils torn from his very grasp. I say I almost pitied him, but I could not afford to spare him.

"You devil's spawn!" he cried, suddenly springing forward.

But before I could move, Leigh's arms were round his neck in a close, determined embrace, and after a short and desperate struggle, both fell to the floor together, Leigh being uppermost.

"We have no time to lose," he cried. "Bring the cord and let us bind him fast."

I knelt down and bound his hands, listening the while for the first sound of alarm, but the struggle

had taken place in silence, and everything was quite still below. Colonel Death now lay watching us with a grim smile. His game was up, but I think he did not yet despair, as he had again recovered his audacious serenity.

"You hold the stronger cards, gentlemen," he said, "and have played them well. But remember that I am flesh and blood, which you are forgetting, and do not cut me quite to the bone."

"I am overwhelmed with regret, Sir John," I answered in the same vein, but never stopping in my task, "to put you to so much inconvenience, but necessity compels. It is altogether your own fault, but you will be more comfortable presently. Captain Lambert and yourself will be able to compare notes."

"You are no fool after all, but you are not out of this yet."

"I do not foresee much difficulty in that," I answered, rising from my knees where I had been tying him; "the little brown bird flies out of the window."

For the first time he saw my plan which he had clearly not anticipated, and he muttered a deep oath.

"Evil words, Sir John," cried Leigh, "you forget you are a right hand of the saints."

"I will not forget you when the time comes to remember this."

"I know what I may expect when that time comes. Now, Mr. Duncombe—" and here the old humour of my friend broke out—"we shall put Sir John to bed."

"It were indeed a pity," I answered, "to leave him here. The floor is hard, and the room is full of draughts."

No one under other circumstances could better have appreciated this action than the old rogue who was its object. We lifted him up from where he lay, and carried him over to the great bed. Here we deposited our burden, and then drew the heavy curtains in such a way as to stifle completely any outcry he might make.

"Adieu, Sir John," I cried. "It has all been in the way of friendship."

Then I turned to Leigh.

"So far," I said, "we have carried this to a marvel but we are not yet out of the wood. Now the window."

Standing there with his bright face glowing, he did not answer me. He laid his rapier on the table, and going to the heavy oak door, turned the key in the lock. Then he ran up to me, holding out both his hands.

"May God forgive me, Tom, for I shall never forgive myself. I dared to doubt you—you the tongue of truth, the heart of honour! And now, perhaps, I have ruined you. But for me we had both been clear. Forgive me if you can, and go remembering that I loved you."

"But you are coming?" I cried, looking at him in astonishment.

"I? From this door I do not move a step. If they enter it will be over my body. My folly ruined us; if necessary, my life will atone for it."

"I shall not stir a step without you," I answered doggedly.

"Then we shall both be lost. While I am here they will suspect nothing, and you will escape in safety. It is not what profits you or me, or what we would will or have; this is the king's service, and if he needed your life or mine we would give it willingly. These letters may mean his honour and the kingdom."

In great part I knew he was right, and that a determined stand at the door meant an almost certain escape. But to fly and leave my friend in danger seemed almost an act of cowardice that, so to speak, I had not the courage to perform. I knew by the look on his face that I could not move him; he had resolved upon this sacrifice, and I knew that I had no time to hesitate; that whatever resolution I should make must be made at once.

"You will go," he cried ; "even for my own sake I implore you. I hear them on the stairs"

At that instant I made up my mind.

"There is no help for it ! I must go. 'Tis the hardest parting of my life."

A radiant smile lighted up his face as he held out his hand to me. We embraced in silence ; indeed I think neither of us could speak, and I left him standing at the door to face our enemies alone. As I raised the window Heaven knows that I would have rejoiced to take his place, for I felt that mine was the harder task. Before I went forth I turned to look at him—the perfect knight, the devoted cavalier. He stood by the door with his drawn rapier in his hand, and his head bent listening ; then he looked up and waved his hand silently, but with a smile upon his face.

A moment after I had reached the window-sill and was looking down into the darkness. As I have already said, I had frequently considered this way of escape, and had traced a passage along the roofs and walls. Even in the daylight it would have proved a perilous journey, but now in the broken and uncertain moonlight the dangers were increased a hundredfold.

I grasped the sill with my hands and swung myself over the empty space. I dropped softly and alighted on the roof beneath. Here I lay for a while listening to see whether I had been discovered, but I heard nothing, and then upon my hands and knees began to creep from point to point. I had not got very far when a wild outcry broke out in the house that I had left. It seemed to me as if the whole place was suddenly astir, and I longed with a great longing to stand with my friend where he kept the door with a fearless heart and courage. I think this sudden clamour increased my own chance of safety. The attention of my enemies was directed solely to the chamber, and they never dreamed of the sacrifice my friend had made in permitting me to go alone. At any rate, I gained

the end of the wall without detection, and with the aid of an iron spouting got safely to the ground, somewhat torn and shaken, but without the breaking of a limb.

In less than an hour I was on board the *Happy Content*, Eli Howell master, bound with a fair wind for France, but sick at heart when I thought of that gloomy chamber, and my gallant friend with all his foes in front of him.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN OLD LETTER.

WHEN I read what I have written in the last chapter, I do not seem to have played a heroic part. That I should leave my friend to face a deadly peril alone, and myself retreat in safety and without scath, might be set down to a care for my own person. But in this I was not regardless of honour, nor swayed by any sordid or personal consideration. I say now that the struggle toward decision—short and vivid as a lightning flash—was the hardest I ever engaged in with myself. Every instinct within me leapt toward my sword-hilt and resistance; I shrank from the thought of destroying the friend to whom I had been so lately reconciled. But at that moment, above the voice of instinct and the claims of friendship, the call of duty and loyalty sounded like a trumpet. I had no choice; I could seek no alternative. Though it may seem strange that I should say this, I look back with some pride on the part I played, for I felt the sacrifice I made was hardly less than his who remained behind, feeling that he was about to give away his life. For I knew that while it was my part to go, it was equally Leigh's part to remain behind, whatever it might cost.

While I lay that night in the hold of the sloop, listening to the flapping of the sails and the swish of the leaping water as we beat against the strong head wind, you can well imagine that I had little sleep or

rest. My imagination peopled the dark, ill-smelling cabin like a theatre. I saw the lonely chamber and the gallant swordsman—the broken door and the flash of twenty swords; I saw and heard as clearly as if I had been a spectator, and I trembled as I watched. It was many months before I heard how it had ended, and then only a broken and disjointed history, but enough to reassure me for the safety of my friend. From himself I heard after many days. This letter I may in part set out here, though it was not written till afterwards, and then diverted the current of my life into new and broken ways.

“ . . . As you know, I was ever an ill scribe; now worse than before. What with my wounded arm and the evil news, I can scarce hold my pen to frame a letter. The devil hath taken these latter times by the tail, and drags them whichever way he pleases. You ever loved to fight him, but I was not so forward; but now there is no help for it, and I must do my part.

“Corragio, we will yet drink together when we have bound the Prince of Darkness and his servants, who seem now to do what they please in this poor England. Great events are toward, in which I would have you take a part, but of this I will write at greater length in its place.

“I have not forgotten our last hurried parting, while old Death lay groaning in the great bed, and you went through the window with a grave face drawn to a most portentous length. I confess that I thought we had seen one another for the last time, but I never for a moment doubted that you would come safely on shipboard, and find your way to France. My friend, Thomas Duncombe, hath the knack of coming to the end of his journey that I, halt-footed as I am, could never compass. My father used to say—but that page is turned and I dare not go back on it. Let

me say that my fears rather centred upon myself, fearing that Sir John would never forgive me, and that one poor sword was a slight defence against twenty points. Howbeit, I was in no mind to despair, and kept up my spirits with a loyal air while I waited for the knocking upon the door that I knew must come anon. My voice troubled, or seemed to trouble, Sir John, for he groaned grievously, and the bed shook under him with his turning and twisting. You know that I never loved nor had cause to love him, for I have long known that he was a rogue, very dangerous and contemptible, but it was with a curious feeling that I drew aside the curtains and sat down upon the side of the bed. We had nearly strangled him, and his face was quite purple. I think in his struggles he had drawn the knot more tightly, but even then I had no will that he should die before my eyes. I hastened to unloose the scarf and give him free breath and speech. But I did not gain his gratitude thereby; in a moment, even before he had found the free use of his tongue, and while he still halted and stumbled over his words, there rushed forth such a crowd of oaths—oath tripping oath in its haste to be out, that I could only listen in silence, and marvel exceedingly. At length I ventured to counsel temperance, suggesting that the relief which this rank blasphemy afforded was a poor counterpoise and equivalent for the apoplexy which he was evidently inciting. But my suggestion only drew forth another whirlwind of blasphemy. Then I took the kerchief gravely and again threatened to bind him for my own comfort and protection. This brought him effectually to a stand, and then while he lay still and bound, I entered upon a discourse that no divine that ever wore cassock and bands could excel or rival.

“I spoke of the way in which he had sought to deliver Beauchamp Hall into Cromwell’s hand, and of his treatment of yourself, with many other misdeeds that his life is full of. But it was clear that

his mind was not set upon my sermon—rather it was with you in your adventurous pilgrimage upon the roof.

“‘You need not trouble concerning Mr. Duncombe,’ I said sedately; ‘he is perfectly safe, and I doubt not full of thanks for your timely warning.’

“‘The devil fly away with both of you,’ he cried. ‘I am a fool, a clown, an abject ass, to be cozened, tricked, duped, bought and sold by a pair of pap-fed boys, good enough only to carry cream from a dairy. God’s sake, spit upon me, man, for I have thrown away a fortune for a pennyweight of vanity. What then!’ he added, after a pause; ‘we are all fools together. Had you been a wise man, you had taken advantage of my cursed stupidity, and been on your way to the black-browed strumpet over the water.’

“‘You were always a liar, Sir John,’ I said calmly; ‘but I thought you were a prudent man, and lied only for your own base ends. We are alone; it cannot profit to slander the queen.’

“‘Nay, but it may ease my mind. Are the rogues never coming?’

“‘That,’ I answered, ‘is the question I am debating with myself. There is another question also.’

“‘What?’

“‘The use that I can make of you.’

“‘The devil you are.’

“‘That seems to be reversing the order of affairs, I admit. You observe, Sir John, that I do not fail to appraise you at your true value. I know you are a rogue, a cheat, a liar, and a traitor; but as one stuffs a bundle of straw into a vent to keep out the rain, I think I shall be able to make use of you to fill up this hole.’

“He turned uneasily, and looked at me with a fixed smile.

“‘I suppose your friends outside are waiting till you

summon them. As you cannot do that, they will be here presently to see what delays their illustrious captain. They may even go so far as to endeavour to break down the door.'

"There is nothing more likely. I do not know what keeps them now.'

"Providence. They are waiting till Duncombe is out of danger. But that is not to the point. How am I to make you useful? In a quarter of an hour I shall have some anxiety for my own safety, being no hero but a plain man, who would live as long as I can. To that end, I would make use of you. Am I to break or bend you?'

"Sir John looked at me stedfastly, never altering the expression of his countenance, but regarding me so gravely that I could not tell what thought was in his mind.

"Before God, Leigh,' he said at length, 'if I did not hate you so much, I could almost come to love you. You see where another cannot walk, but here these nimble wits of yours carry you too far. You have bound me neck and crop, and can, therefore, say what you please. I do not complain—'tis the fortune of war. But I also will speak my mind. I go to the devil in my own way, and let no man either lead or drive me. Were it to save my life I would not wag a finger for you. Now break or bend me if you can.'

"At this moment there came what I had been expecting for some time—a loud rapping upon the door of the chamber, which awakened all the echoes, and then suddenly ceased.

"Will you speak or I?'

"But Sir John only looked at me the more gravely, and paid no heed to the rapier that I held menacingly in my hand, though I had no thought of using it.

"Then I must answer for both of us,' I said. 'I fear I can say nothing to the purpose.'

"I heard plainly the sound of whispering voices on the other side of the door, and the stealthy shuffling of feet that moved along the passage. Then for a moment there was an expectant silence. My voice sounded strangely; in some manner it seemed lost in that vast dim room. The tone that I had assumed came back to me like the quavering whisper of a ghost.

"'Who knocks so loud?' I cried, advancing toward the door.

"There was a brief interval, and then someone (I think I recognised the fellow afterwards) called upon me to open.

"'Not so loud, my friend,' I cried; 'you will awaken Sir John, who is now comfortably abed. He cannot receive visitors. He bids you go to the nearest alehouse and drink his health; peradventure, I will myself discharge the reckoning in the morning.'

"Sir John burst into a loud laugh, and I think he enjoyed the humour of the situation even more than myself, who had now the prospect of much unpleasantness in store for me.

"'If this goes on I shall love you after all,' he said. 'You have furnished me with an excellent entertainment.'

"'There is still a great deal more to come,' I answered.

"'*Haud dubitandum*,' he said, 'and I shall enjoy it still better. There are two or three fellows there who like nothing better than writing their names on the skin of a gentleman.'

"The eyes of the old rogue were now growing bright with excitement and expectation, nor did I doubt that he was soon to be gratified, for the demand for admittance now became so pressing and imperative that the very doorposts shook, and a portion of the ceiling fell with a crash on the floor. I expected the panels to give way every moment, but they

held stoutly, and I confess that but little more had sent me following you through the window, had I thought you were safely at the end of your journey. But of that I was not certain, and moreover, I had some curiosity to see how long the door would stand. Before the play was finished, my curiosity was fully satisfied. Shall I become Sir Pandarus of Troy, and set forth the feats of arms that I performed this memorable night? Were Sir John willing, he could relate them all, for there was nothing that escaped him from the moment the door was thrust down until I was finally disarmed and bound with a stout rope, after the manner of a dangerous animal. He was the chorus, and I the protagonist, for all the time that I stood upon the defensive he sang his battle song after a fashion of his own. For the moment he seemed lifted above any selfish desire to see his friends victorious, and applauded equally my own efforts and those of my foes. The old cheat seemed to have lost his wits, and as he lay bound upon the bed, bellowed with delight, or choked with rage according to the varying moves in the game. I kept my corner while I could, but with a broken rapier and a wounded arm I was forced to yield to destiny. When I had been duly disposed of, the sour-faced rogues turned their attention to Sir John, who now played his part to a marvel, and extorted my reluctant admiration for his powers of dissimulation. He whined and scolded, invented several episodes, and finally would have turned the room into a tabernacle, had it not been suggested that you might not yet have escaped beyond apprehension. But I knew by this time you had your precious packet safe aboard, and was careless what they did. Let me confess, my old friend, that I was happy beyond measure; happy that you had shown yourself loyal and magnanimous as ever, and that I had proved myself a dolt and fool to doubt the honestest and most generous heart in the world; happy that if any should suffer, it was myself and not



"HERE A MAN KNELT, WITH HIS HEAD BOWED UPON HIS HANDS"

1

the friend I had wronged. *Confiteor et doleo*, as Master Twycroft taught us.

"My pen hath haled my wits to this great length over much paper, and it were fitting that I should now draw to an end. But let me say another word that may have interest for you. Sir John proved himself not wholly black, dappled rather, and willing to do me a kindness without payment or reward, which surprised me strangely. I was anxious to escape out of the hands of the saints, and suggested to the worthy knight with some circumlocution that an arrangement might be made from which he might draw some profit. But he would not hear of such a thing; he was a gentleman, maligned and misunderstood. I had done him wrong from first to last, and would now have an opportunity of appraising his character at its true value, with much more to the same purpose. Yet after some days he hinted delicately that he was ready to do me a service, and for your sake would connive at my escape, which I knew he had it in his power to do. Perhaps he was anxious to remove a witness to his discomfiture, but I must confess he might have arrived at the same end with a better bargain for himself. But I had already discovered a means to effect my escape in another way, and was not anxious to be beholden to him. You know the song of the gaoler's daughter? Henceforth when I sing it, I shall end every verse with a blessing on the beautiful name of Priscilla. It is a long story that I may tell you some day, but meanwhile fill your glass with the red wine of France, and drink upon your knees to my blue-eyed preserver. For myself I shall never see her again; but I shall always remember the best and sweetest traitress who ever followed a woman's instincts, and took pity upon misfortune and distress."

I need not here set forth what followed, as it does

not enter into my narrative ; but I was unfeignedly glad that my old friend had so successfully terminated his adventure, and wrote in abundant and overflowing spirits.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HANDS OF THE CARDINAL.

RETURNING to my own story, I have already related how I made my escape, and need not burden this narrative with any description of the way in which I contrived to reach the *Happy Content*. Nor will I linger over the voyage that I made in that ancient and ill-named vessel, as we beat nearly the whole voyage against head winds, and I lay for the most part wholly careless and oblivious to all that passed around me.

The consolation offered by Eli Howell, the master, was not of such character to give me much comfort; nay, I think the old sea-dog enjoyed my discomfiture, and would willingly have conveyed me back to enjoy the spectacle of my misery. But he was faithful to his trust, and landed me at Havre de Grace after a long and stormy passage, and at least one narrow escape at the hands of an English ship of war.

"I have earned my wages," he said with a curious twinkle in his eyes as he bade me farewell, "and have run my cargo safe ashore. I don't know, and I don't inquire, the nature of the goods I've landed, but I have my own thoughts. I am much afraid you are bad company for an honest trader when there are so many cruisers about, but I'll not deny the guineas are good, and I'm sure you'd have been good company if your sea legs had been a bit stronger."

I bade the worthy fellow farewell with much goodwill upon both sides, and arrived in Paris without further adventure or misfortune. I had been recommended to an honest man in the Rue du Tiquetonne, and here at the Coq d'Or I stayed during my sojourn in the city. Her majesty, to whom the Louvre had been assigned as a lodging, though without that state which befitted the royalty of England, had gone forth into the country when I arrived, but was hourly expected back. Mr. Cowley, who acted as secretary to my Lord Jermyn, received me with every expression of kindness and esteem, for though he was some years my senior, we had been intimate at the University, and I had been among the warmest admirers of his genius. We spent the evening of the day on which I arrived together, and had so much to hear and to relate that it was long after midnight before we broke up our meeting. Neither of us, I think, derived much comfort from the other's confessions, and it was soon made evident to me that his majesty had little hope of assistance from France and the cardinal. Nay rather, it seemed that astute diplomatist, though profuse in his professions of friendship, had certain crooked views of his own to further, that suited ill with the king's interests, and, while putting on a smiling face, worked the while to his detriment with craft and subtlety. All this Mr. Cowley told me sitting in his fair chamber that overlooked a spacious garden when we had entered on our third bottle—all this and a great deal more that I do not now purpose to set down. For in this narrative I would do no more than relate what I myself have seen and done, and that without much skill and grace. To others I leave the task of writing the history of that time—the ambition of some, the duplicity of many, and the breaking up of national landmarks that looked back upon remote antiquity.

Mr. Cowley and myself, as I say, sat together for several hours in his fair chamber, and discoursed like

intimate friends after a prolonged separation—rather he spoke and I listened, for I never knew a man more fluent and eloquent. I noticed that he spoke very unwillingly of the queen, and once he referred to her with some bitterness; but he instantly recovered himself, and hid his confusion under a quotation from the Greek.

“Men naturally,” he had said, “bring their private passions into public affairs, and while they think they are doing the service of the State, and while they pursue their personal loves and avoid their natural antipathies. They keep in view the immediate object, while they lose sight of the motive that compels them or restrains. Who shall say what hath overturned states and brought great empires to ruin? A word uttered in heedless jest, the curl on a courtesan’s forehead, the whim of a faithless wife. Ah! *dux femina facti!*—there, Mr. Duncombe, is the rock we have split upon, and a splendid kingdom dashed to pieces.”

I suppose he saw the surprise depicted upon my face, for he immediately changed the subject of our conversation, and during the rest of our interview never once reverted to it. Rather he turned to his literary work, which I have always thought very sweet and wise, and, as is the wont of poets, repeated long extracts, until I grew dull and almost ceased to hear the full unbroken flow of his musical voice. Then he insisted on accompanying me back to my lodging, where we had another bottle of the wine of Bordeaux, and so ended the day.

Early the following morning I called upon Cardinal Mazarin, who, after much waiting upon my part, received me alone, and, as I thought, almost with an appearance of secrecy. This great man—if he was a great man who only reaped the harvest that another had sowed—did not impress me favourably, nor did he meet my eye with that directness and honesty that a sincere man uses in his intercourse. There

was a look of cunning in his dark Italian eyes, a shifting restlessness in his thin red lips, and a pedantic hardness in his narrow, straitened forehead.

When I entered the room in which he sat he bade his secretary retire, and, leaving me standing, cut the silk that bound the letter with a thin dagger-like knife that lay upon his desk. He read the letter to the end, and then turned the pages and seemed to re-read, but all the time I could see that he watched me from under his eyelids. After a while he laid down the paper on the table before him, and smoothed it out with his palm. For a long time he seemed to admire the smooth texture and whiteness of his hands, and the brilliance of the jewels that flashed in his rings.

"What is your condition?" he said suddenly.

"A gentleman," I answered.

"That. I mean what service have you with the King of England?"

"I bring your eminence this letter—nothing else."

"You had no more to say that was not written here—no private message, no further written communication?"

"My duty is discharged. I have nothing further."

"You saw his majesty?"

"It was from his hands that I received the document."

"And did he say nothing more—not a word?"

"Only that his cause was going well."

"Were you told to tell me that?"

He bent his dark flashing eyes upon me narrowly. I felt that I dare not hesitate or prevaricate.

"I give your eminence the message as the king delivered it."

"I suppose you agree with his majesty in that?"

"It is a subject's duty. A humble gentleman has little means of knowledge."

He smiled drily. "You are discreet at anyrate."



"BUT ALL THE TIME I COULD SEE THAT HE WATCHED ME FROM
UNDER HIS EYELIDS"

This letter is not for my eyes alone. I had hoped the messenger might have been a commentary upon the contents and illustrated certain passages that are still obscure. You are certain?"

"I have told your eminence the truth."

"You Englishmen are like your own oxen, very hard to drive. You have other letters?" This he said very rapidly, and with a quick movement.

I hesitated and was silent.

"Well, sir?"

"I have nothing further to say," I answered. "I am only the hands of my master."

"Stupid hands, honest hands!" he said with a smile. "I have known for the last quarter of an hour where you carry them—there, in your breast. To the Queen of England, I presume?"

"That is my secret, your eminence."

"When men are playing for great stakes, sir, they are careful who overlooks the cards. A kingdom is a royal stake, and should not be lightly endangered. Were I master and not an humble steward—a poor churchman whom God has raised to foster a great State—may I see the letter?"

"Sir!" I cried, indignantly.

"Chut!" he answered, "you misunderstand my meaning. I meant but the superscription. I cannot help the king while others give him counsel that means ruin, and build up schemes that carry failure and dishonour on their front. Loving husbands, foolish wives, and bankrupt fortunes—I have seen the same in France. He who would rule must bury his affections. I am told you have one man in England."

"Men grow there, your eminence."

"Pardieu! you have a nimble wit. This man has strength and courage, and will not be easily turned from his purpose. He seems to be of iron. I watch his course with interest."

"Your eminence means—"

"I have forgotten the name ; I have it here among my papers. Your English names are hard and difficult to master."

"Perhaps they suit the English nature," I answered, smiling.

"The Queen of England differs from you there."

During all our lengthened interview, and it lasted nearly an hour, he lost no opportunity of girding at her majesty, and showed his feeling against her in a thousand ways. I came likewise to the conclusion, though he said no word that justified me in drawing it, that the king had but a poor friend in this adroit and saturnine churchman.

I was myself very guarded in my replies, and while he sought to draw from me something of the condition of the country, I enlarged upon the loyalty of the people, and the certainty of the king's ultimate success. But I knew that I did not impress him, and that he looked upon my words as due either to the warmth of partizanship or the speciousness of policy.

Once and again he returned to the queen's letter, but with that covert curiosity which sometimes marks the child, frequently the woman, and always the priest. I knew as well as if his mind had lain open before me like the fair page of a printed book, that he took the measure of my honour and fidelity. I knew likewise that the offer to purchase my honesty trembled upon his tongue, but stopped short at speech, repressed by something, I know not what, in my looks and words. Finally, he bade me farewell with great courtesy, and expressed the hope that I would be present at his reception.

"You may rely upon my good-will, Mr. Duncombe, and I hope you will find your stay very agreeable. You do not stay at the Louvre?"

I answered briefly that I did not.

"Then you will let me know your address, and above all things be careful of your company. Paris

is a dangerous place for strangers. Our Parisians sometimes do not regard the law."

There was a dangerous smile upon his lips that instantly put me upon my guard. While he bowed me out I saw him whisper something to his secretary, who had returned to the room. The latter glanced at me with one swift look, and passed out of the door before me. I knew with that natural instinct which is born in danger that I should be followed to my lodging, and I was not mistaken. My footsteps were dogged until I reached the Coq d'Or, and when I entered I left the spy standing on the other side of the street. What the cardinal's design was I could not tell, but his anxiety so ill concealed with regard to the queen's letter raised a host of evil suspicions in my mind. That he did not suspect me I felt certain; that he meditated some scheme with regard to me, or something in my possession, I did not doubt.

The more I meditated on the matter the clearer it became, and I instantly resolved to take every precaution in my power. I therefore returned to the Louvre, where I found my friend Mr. Cowley engaged among his papers, and requested him to hold the letter till the queen returned. I did not mention my suspicions, and said nothing with regard to my interview with the cardinal, but I did not fail to discern from his manner that he suspected a mystery. However, he agreed with me that I was right, and very willingly consented to act as my depository till such time as I might hand the letter to the queen in person. When this was done there was a great weight off my mind. I had been living so long under the burden of fear and apprehension, that this had now become a habit, and for the first time for nearly a month I breathed with a sense of freedom and relief.

That my suspicions were not without foundation I had ample reason to discover before the night was over.

On my return to my lodgings I found the house

empty ; there was no sign or trace of host or servant. I even entered the kitchen, but the solitary jack turned unminded before the fire, and the capon that hung there was nearly reduced to ashes. I called loudly two or three times, but met with no answer. Not for a moment understanding the meaning of this solitude that appeared so suddenly created, I ascended the staircase, and passed down the corridor to my bedroom. The door was closed, but I pushed it open, and then stood thunderstruck with astonishment. My trunk lay open, and its contents were scattered over the room. Three long-sworded gentlemen were busily engaged in turning out my pockets and ripping up the lining of my valise, while a fourth sat upon the bed twisting his moustache, and watched the progress of the search. They had evidently concluded as I entered, and had been unsuccessful. This, however, did not appear to discompose them at all, for they were very cheerful over their task, and examined my wardrobe with great curiosity. I knew instinctively why they were here—I saw the little cardinal's hands at work in this unceremonious visit. For this reason I determined to entertain my visitors with all ceremony, and give them no cause of offence. I therefore raised my hat solemnly, and advanced a little into the room. I saw they anticipated resistance, for every man made for his sword hilt.

"Do not allow me to disturb you, gentlemen," I said. "Pray continue. Mine is only a traveller's wardrobe."

"Monsieur is a gentleman," said he upon the bed, now rising to his feet, and returning my salutation, "and cannot fail to apprehend our meaning. We merely desire to learn your English fashions."

"Assuredly. Can I be of any service?"

"That suit you wear—it is a different mode from ours in France. The pockets now—"

"Are capacious and convenient. You can examine, for yourself."

"If it does not trouble monsieur."

"Not the least in the world. I am altogether at your service."

"It is always a consolation to deal with a man of quality. I suppose this is where a gentleman carries the letters of his mistress?"

"If he is a careless lover," I answered meaningly. "If thoughtful he finds a safer place."

"Ah! I should like to know. In England now—"

All the while, and that very thoroughly, my pockets were being searched, while outwardly we treated one another with great politeness.

"In England," I said, "we place them out of reach of careless hands, and when we come to France we try to do the same."

"I am disconsolate to hear that. I should have desired above all things to know how your English ladies express themselves."

"I thought it was the fashion of my clothes."

"Ah, monsieur, I am cursed with a great curiosity."

"I am sorry you are late. Nothing had given me greater pleasure than to increase your knowledge. This afternoon, unfortunately, I left my letters in the Louvre."

"With the queen?" he cried, for the first time in his natural tone.

"I thought you spoke of other letters."

"I had forgotten. On your honour as a gentleman?"

"On my honour as a gentleman. I had heard you Parisians were a curious people, and did not care to have my private affairs made public. You see I was right."

"Monsieur is wisdom itself. He is not offended?"

"I am charmed to have made your acquaintance. I hope some day we may have the pleasure of drinking a bottle of wine together."

"Assuredly: but in the meantime we have put monsieur to great trouble."

"By no means."

"But the letters—"

"Are now out of my keeping."

"A gentleman knows when another tells him the truth. It might be well to say nothing—you understand?"

"Perfectly; neither to the cardinal, who might not let the matter rest, nor to any other."

"You have said the last word. Monsieur is not a fool."

He looked at me meaningly with a smile in his eyes, and bowed himself out, his watch-dogs following at his heels. Then after I had set my affairs somewhat to rights, for their examination had been very thorough, I descended the staircase and found the domestic life of the Coq d'Or flowing smoothly in its wonted channel. Suzanne and Lizette were helping madame in the kitchen, and Maitre Coquelin was dusting the cobwebs from half-a-dozen bottles at the top of the cellar steps. He regarded me with a look of stupid wonder when I inquired the meaning of the visit to which I had been subjected.

"Monsieur dreams; he has been asleep. This was but a dream. There have been no strangers in the house."

"In Paris, then, you dream when you are awake?"

"Oh, monsieur, that is perfectly true. Men have dreamt they were riding to the Bastille, and when they have awakened they dreamt they could not get out. I keep my eyes closed and never mention my dreams. Monsieur did not know the Sieur de Longchamp—but that was some years ago. Ah, yes, he is dead now, and may not be mentioned. Monsieur will sup now?"

"But the Sieur de Longchamp?"

"He also dreamt when he was awake. I will ask you to try my wine of Anjou."

Until the day I left his house Maitre Coquelin never referred to this incident again, and for my own part I determined to be equally discreet upon the matter. But I had no doubt that for some reasons of his own Cardinal Mazarin was anxious to know in what way the King of England wrote to the Queen, his wife.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE KING'S HEART.

THE queen returned from Troyes early in the week, but I was not admitted to her presence for some days afterwards. This was due to no fault of my own, for I was almost pressing in my importunity, but I was told that she was indisposed, and unable to transact any business, however urgent. Certainly, when I was at last admitted to her room, I saw no trace of her recent illness, but a lady very radiant and beautiful, whose comeliness sorrow had not dimmed nor misfortune lessened. She reclined on a fauteuil, somewhat negligently attired for the mistress of a great kingdom, but looking so sweet and lovely that I did not pause to wonder at the adoration of her husband and the rapturous admiration of her friends. Her large dark eyes, shaded by their black lashes, were clear and luminous and full of laughter ; her forehead was broad and white, with dark curls straying over it ; and her lips, red and sweet and dainty, were the home of a thousand smiles that had each a different meaning. Of all the voices that I ever heard, I think the queen's was the tenderest and richest.

As I came in she held out her hand to me to kiss, which I did very respectfully, and then waited until she should address me. When she spoke I noticed that it was with quite a foreign accent, that gave an added charm and naïveté to her speech.

"You are the gentleman of whom my Lord Jermyn has spoken. You bring letters and news?"

"Letters, your majesty, hardly news."

"For that we shall see. Had you any difficulty in bringing this?"

She held up the silken envelope in her hand, not having yet broken the seal or shown any anxiety to discover the contents. I thought a look of weariness and distaste passed across her tell-tale face, and darkened the serenity of her brow.

"Little," I answered, "but the ordinary accidents of travel."

"I see you have a story will interest me—some-time you will tell it. Alas, the stories that I hear are not at all interesting. You have seen the cardinal?"

I bowed.

"I think there is another story there, but not so interesting. You do not love the cardinal?"

"He received me very courteously, and has since shown me some attention."

"Then he hopes to use you. What service can you render him? He sells his favours, like the bourgeois that he is."

There was a fine disdain in her voice, and her face flushed with anger as she spoke; then she broke the seal and read the king's letter through very hurriedly. I may be wrong—I speak only my own thoughts—but she seemed to read without interest, and to end without feeling. I know that while she read I stood and wondered, for all the time the figure of the solitary and broken writer, with his grey hair and wasted face, and the look of despairing love and sorrow in his eyes, rose before me as I watched. I could not but contrast the wealth of affection, the strength and tenderness of feeling, that had inspired this letter that I had carried with so much danger to myself, and the careless air of graceful indifference

with which the reader held it in her hands. Yet it is not for me to read the heart or try the mind, and I would not speak uncharitably. When she had finished she glanced at me for a moment and then called out, "My lord."

There was a movement at the other end of the great room, and a gentleman stepped from behind a screen, which I had not noticed before, and advanced toward the queen very sedately. He was clad in a rich suit, which set off a figure by no means striking, with a face plain but full of intelligence and audacity. His eyes were bright and glancing, but the expression of his mouth was hard and cold. He did not seem to observe me, but turned to the queen with a look of inquiry.

"The last letter from England. The king has sent a message to yourself."

"Is there any news?"

A look of contempt passed like a shadow over the queen's lips.

"There is no news. It is the old story. In the beginning there is nothing but despair, in the end nothing but hope—he does not change. Oh, if there were but a man in France! what would not Henri III. have done?"

"Will your majesty permit me to see the letter?"

She handed it to him without a word, and then turned to me with a smile of resignation.

"His majesty has commended you to my service, and has spoken highly of your faithfulness. Alas! your queen is but a poor exile."

"The more my service may be useful to your majesty."

"The air of France has already brightened your English wits," she said. "Now let me hear the news from Oxford."

I answered her questions as well as I was able, these dealing chiefly with the ladies and gentlemen

who still frequented the court there, but hardly at all touching upon the king. She looked, I think, upon him as the cause of all her calamities, and once or twice paused upon the threshold of ungenerous speech. But she did not disguise her hatred of the Parliament and the common people, looking upon them as so many audacious children whom indulgence had spoiled, and that alone. The king had overfed and pampered them until they had forgotten they were subjects. A king should rule and make himself obeyed, nor dream of treaties with rebellious subjects. But I write now after the interval of many years; then I was wholly taken by her beauty, charmed with her grace, and dazzled by her wit.

When my Lord Jermyn had finished his perusal of the letter, he returned it to the queen with a very grave smile that I thought almost supercilious, and inwardly resented.

"I am glad the letter did not fall into the hands of his majesty's enemies; it had been another cause of offence. He has written very plainly. His majesty has reposed an unusual degree of confidence in you, sir."

This he said, turning to me with a supercilious look, and, as it were, taking my measure from head to foot. I grew hot under the look, and though I was in some degree restrained by the queen's presence, I answered shortly:

"If that is indeed so, my lord, you will see that his confidence has not been ill-placed."

My ready answer seemed to afford the queen some amusement, for she leaned back on her couch and laughed a little rippling laugh.

"My Lord Jermyn has had his answer. Now, monsieur, take the letter and leave us, for I wish to talk with Mr. Duncombe, and he will be more at his ease when you are gone."

Her majesty afterwards married this gentleman, and I never believed, nor do I now believe, those

slanders upon her character that I have heard too often repeated. But such a look passed between them as no woman should bestow upon any man but him she calls her husband, and I could easily see the perfect understanding that even at this time existed between them. I think I am not naturally of a jealous nature, but at this look that chord was touched for my absent master.

My lord went away without condescending to notice me further, and when he had gone, the queen motioned to me to take the chair beside her. Whether she played upon my youth and inexperience, I do not know, but certainly when this, our first interview, had drawn to a close, I had become her devoted and enthusiastic servant. Her low, soft voice, that had a caressing movement in it, affected me like music, and her dark, liquid eyes had an inexpressible charm in their tender depths.

When a queen stoops to flatter, she ever finds a ready listener. Certainly, when I had left her presence for the first time, I admired how she had first placed me entirely at my ease, and then drawn forth my confidences, like one who felt an interest in my youth. Familiarity afterwards removed my illusions, and showed me her light yet callous nature ; but for myself, during all the time I served her, no man ever had a kinder and more indulgent mistress.

Here then follows a great gap in this history which it is not my present intention to fill. Some day I may find time—alas! how much we leave to the future!—to tell the story of my wanderings, and certain passages of my life in France and Holland. When I left England I had no thought that for nearly four years I should remain in exile. But so it was. One service led imperceptibly to another, and I had henceforward little reason to complain that I remained unemployed. I hope that I may say without pre-

sumption that my work was done with sagacity and faithfulness, and not altogether without credit. But that work was done in vain. States are like men—they court the fortunate, and have no pity for the weak. Though I am now able to see how unsubstantial were the hopes that flattered her majesty and those who served her, that accident or chance would aid the royal cause, she never ceased to labour toward the end she had in view, nor spared her servants in that work. Each successive misfortune only led us to believe that this might prove the last, and we closed our eyes to the truth that now I wonder we were able to shut out. I remember the arrival of the news from Naseby—that battle where the royal cause was lost for ever—and even then we did not quite despair. It is with very different feelings that I now follow the footsteps of the destiny that shaped each dark event to the solemn, awful close; the king's aimless wanderings that seem to me the saddest page in history, the intrigues with the Scots, the forlorn hopes the Parliament held out, down to the time his majesty was sent to Carisbrooke, a prisoner.

It is here that I again take up the thread and weave the broken tale. As I have said, I remained all this time in the queen's service, without any opportunity being afforded me of returning to England. But that came at length. Leigh had written to me after a prolonged silence imploring me to return, and setting out the reasons at great length. He was hopeful that the tide in the king's affairs had turned, and that now there were hopes of restoring his majesty to liberty. Above all things I was wanted in England. There was no longer any prospect of assistance from France; if anything remained to be done it must be accomplished by the loyal gentlemen who had already ventured everything. This letter was written in a tone of such earnestness that I knew no ordinary motive had prompted the writer. I hardly hesitated. Even had there existed no more substantial

reason, I only awaited the least excuse to return. And so, after four years of wandering, I again found myself on shipboard, changed in many things, but in one thing still true and constant.

CHAPTER XXII.

AND STILL THE KING.

I HAD left England a youth—ardent, impetuous, inexperienced—I returned a man sobered by the vicissitudes of fortune, and armed with a knowledge of my own limitations and weakness. I was no longer guided by the swift prompting of my own feelings; the hot pulse had died out of my blood, and a more chastened judgment had taken the place of the emotions that had been wont to sway and govern me. But in some respects I had not altered. The loyalty that had filled my heart in earlier days still burned with the same clear and splendid flame; my love for the king and attachment to his cause had in no respect lessened or abated. For his sake there was no sacrifice I was not prepared to make; there was no misfortune I was not ready to undergo. I had already suffered something in his service. I had hung about antechambers and carried messages; I had bribed and bullied and prayed through a long period of diplomacy and intrigue; I had remained in exile, sometimes almost in want, and above all, for four years my eyes had never rested on the face of my mistress, and her name had hardly passed my lips. Sometimes my heart hungered for one glance of her dear eyes, one word from her dear lips.

During all this time no word had passed between us, and I sometimes thought it likely that she had

forgotten her old friend who had seemed so luke-warm and inconstant. But through all my wanderings her name had been the lode-star of my heart—a hope, a memory that kept my life sweet and clear. And now, when my foot touched English ground, it was of Melody Leigh that I first thought; in the midst of the darkness and perplexity into which I was passing the light of my love burned strong and pure like a single star on a dark and stormy night. I might be forgotten—I should never forget.

When I disembarked in the Thames and entered London, it seemed to me almost like a foreign city. Men seemed everywhere struck by a panic fear; they went about dreading they knew not what, and hanging, as it were, suspended between a great danger passed and another still impending.

Sir Percival Leigh met me on my arrival, and was no less changed than his surroundings. His old careless humour was quite gone, the lines about his lips had hardened, and his youth had quite passed from his face with its brightness and vivacity. But he received me like one almost coming back from the dead, catching me by the shoulders, as he had done when we were boys, and kissing me upon the cheek. I think his eyes were moist—I know that mine were—when our greeting was finished. We had both suffered since we had last met, he perhaps more than I, and it seemed as though we stood face to face with our boyhood once more, with its unclouded hope and freshness. But Leigh at this time, like many another devoted cavalier, was at the very nadir of his fortunes, and showed his poverty in his disordered dress and discoloured doublet. He who had been the very pink and mirror of exquisite neatness, now went attired like a broken serving-man or discarded groom. But he made no complaint, nor murmured at his lot, and though resolute to mend his fortunes, bore them with a cheerful composure.

“I can still find a crown on great occasions,” he

said, as we sat down at a table in a tavern much frequented by those of his own party; "a crown and a contented mind. What then? I have been better and worse. After Naseby I lived on a handful of beans in a wet ditch for nearly a week, and after Worcester I lived on nothing at all. One grows used to poverty. The lean kine do not take up much room, and Egypt—"

"But Beauchamp—"

"Melted in the refining pot, and rattling in the pockets of the saints of God. Commissions, sequestrations, inquisitions—all sorts and conditions of godly men have meted out my heritage, and divided their portion. Wherefore should the malignant not be despoiled, and his name become a byword and a rock of offence? Colonel Stand-fast Smith, formerly a tailor in the city, hath entered into possession of the Hall, and Percival Leigh is left with a patrimony of slender wit, and two not very useful hands. Let us dine and give thanks."

"Are these things as bad as you say?"

"Worse, man, worse. The devil and all his legions have put on bands, cropped their hair, learned to make prayers, and go up and down this merry England with the sword in one hand, and the Bible in the other, till there will soon not be an honest man left living among us. So far they have had their own way, but they are now quarrelling over the bones, and, please God, the king will soon enjoy his own again."

"Amen," I said, "if this is not another wild—"

"Hush," he said cautiously. "You will have the whole tale shortly. The Parliament is pulling this way, the Army is pulling that, and they would rend his majesty between them. We are playing now for more than the safety of the kingdom—'tis the very life of the king that is at stake."

"They would not dare to lay their hands on that" I cried.

"Pish!" he answered; "the air of France has stolen half your wits. There is nothing that they would not dare and do. They are all his friends, but friends who itch to taste his blood, and share the spoils between them. No prisoner in the Bastile is in closer confinement than his majesty in Carisbrooke. And wherefore? You'll help to answer that."

"I cannot answer what I do not know."

"I have answered for you."

He laid his hand upon my arm very earnestly and lowered his voice.

"I doubted your faith and honour once; I shall not doubt again. For three years the king has been a prisoner, and this holy Parliament and holier army have eaten of the fat till the people have grown sick of both. Once the king is free—"

I looked at him in amazement, seeing now the scheme in which it was intended that I should take part, and fearing that this was only another visionary plan of which I had seen so many come to a disastrous and fatal end.

"But," I said, "Carisbrooke is a place of strength, and the king is strictly guarded."

"Walls are but stones," he answered, "and bars are but iron; we shall find a way. One man within is stronger than a regiment without, and I think I know one man strong enough to answer the purpose."

There was a time when I should have asked no questions but have entered cheerfully into any plan that promised enterprise and danger. But I had travelled so far along the path of failure and misfortune that it came natural to me now to hesitate and inquire. He saw the look of doubt and hesitation on my face.

"You have not grown cold?" he said, raising his brows.

"God forbid," I answered; "but when a man ventures his life and brings, he knows not what,

danger on them he loves, he must know more than I know now. He must know with whom he ventures and what is the profit and the peril. We are not boys playing blind man's buff, and in this, before I move, I must see my way."

"There was a time when honest Tom Duncombe did not sit among the philosophers," he cried, with a laugh; "but you have grown older in your travels. I am but a poor soldier myself, taught to ask no questions, but to serve the king."

"I would serve him too—I have done my best to serve him; but our labours have been only thrown away, or brought disaster on his head. You must tell me all or nothing."

"I will tell you all in due time. I began at the wrong end, forgetting that now your head was filled with craft and worldly wisdom; but here we walk upon the solid earth, and cannot fail. A child may put his finger on the page, and read it with his infant lisp. The Parliament is fearful of the army—Jack Presbyter was still a greedy saint—the army would be rid of Parliament; but while the king is here among them, they cannot fly with safety at each other's throat. Each fears the other making use of him, and all the while the people have grown sick of talking hypocrites and fighting Pharisees. They never will unite again, and were his majesty but free, a hundred thousand swords would bring him to his own again. 'Tis clear as daylight."

"It may be, but the means—"

"You and I, and a score of loyal gentlemen, whom I trust you will meet to-night. We cannot storm the castle, and Hammond has no price that we can pay him—that was tried, and failed; but we can find a way."

"I cannot see—"

"I hope that others will be blind as you have grown—from within, man, from within. There never was a dungeon digged so deep that money would not

draw the wretched prisoner out. We want an unknown man, with head and hands, to do as great a work as man has ever done—to sit secure in Carisbrooke, and when occasion serves, to turn the key.”

“Should this fail, it means ruin to the king.”

“It will not fail. The scheme runs deeper than you think. Our messenger goes armed with high credentials.”

“Here again I am beyond my depth ; I do not like swimming in these deep waters.”

For all my apparent hesitation, Leigh's words had awakened a great hope and expectation in my breast, that my judgment and caution struggled against in vain. I knew his ardent and impetuous nature, but I knew also that upon occasions no man showed greater discretion and sagacity, and I felt that there might be more in the scheme than at first sight presented itself. That he was himself greatly in earnest there was no doubt, and he was equally in earnest that I should join in the venture. The freedom of the king might, nay, I was convinced at that time did mean the turning-point in the great struggle, but the means of securing that deliverance was yet wholly beyond my imagination. But as Leigh unfolded his plan I became gradually more sanguine. If it was possible for a faithful agent to gain his footing in Carisbrooke as a personal attendant upon the king, it was not unlikely that being a man of wit and address, he might find a means to liberate his majesty. But to effect an entrance where so many precautions were taken, and a watch so strict and vigilant was kept that even communication with the king was impossible, seemed to me a thing almost desperate and hopeless. But Leigh declared that the means had already been provided in a manner almost providential ; but on this head he was vagueness itself, and offered me no definite information.

“The secret is not mine alone,” he said, “and I can

say more than I have said. To-night you will learn all. But this I can promise, that should you join us, in a fortnight you will have a daily audience with the king, and power enough to lead his gaolers by the nose."

"Then is the age of miracles returned?"

"There is no miracle here, but the devil taken in his own toils."

At this point he rose and placed his hands upon my shoulders. He spoke earnestly and with great feeling.

"My old friend, there is none can help us here like you. You are unknown, unsuspected, and acquainted with his majesty, who has long known your loyal service to the queen. I will not speak of the rewards that follow our success—that would not influence you—but we will save the king."

I still hung back, desirous to know by what mysterious means Carisbrooke was to be thrown open to me, and feeling convinced that here lurked the real danger in the whole design. But my friend's arguments and enthusiasm at length prevailed upon me, and half reluctantly I consented to meet his friends and learn the entire scheme.

"I told you," Leigh cried, "that this design runs deep, but to-night you will see how deep it runs. Now, one bottle more to the memory of the evil times that are gone, and to the hope of the good times that are to come. God save his majesty."

We both drank the toast standing, and then shook hands without saying a word.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TANGLED WEB.

LEIGH'S confidence in the success of his scheme made, I confess, a strong impression upon me, but I did not fail to recognise the serious results which might follow from the failure of the enterprise. He who attempted this work must take his life in his hands—a forlorn hope attacking the strongest position of the enemy. That was a chance which a brave man would willingly undertake—a part of the day's campaign—and it was not here that doubt and hesitation met me. But failure might mean irretrievable ruin and destruction to the king. It would furnish another handle to his enemies, whom only fear of the popular sentiment had so long restrained from utterly destroying. It would give a pretext for unmasking the designs of those daring plotters, whose whispers were already becoming audible. Nay, even if we succeeded in liberating the king, it might mean only another hopeless struggle, the fruitless loss of gallant lives, and the complete extinguishment of any hope that still remained. But on the other hand there were a thousand chances that it meant the restoration of the cause, the complete discomfiture of its enemies, the union of its friends, and the safety of his majesty, whose very life was now in jeopardy.

This last consideration was of great weight and

moment, and, I think, finally decided me. I was still in the dark as to the execution of the design, and knew no more than that my services were needed, but I had unlimited faith in Leigh's caution and skill. His natural talent for diplomacy had been sharpened by necessity and danger, and I felt that he was the last person in the world to leave anything to the caprices of fortune or the accidents of chance. He had declined to mention names, but this I understood in an adventure so perilous and full of risk. One thing alone staggered and perplexed me. He had spoken of the design running deep, and though the phrase was vague I knew its meaning and felt its significance. To make use of the king's enemies in a matter so vital to his welfare exposed him to the risk of treachery, and for myself I should have preferred the simplest means and fewest confidants. But here again I stifled the voice of doubt, and abandoned myself to the hope that never failed me, almost till that last dark hour when our hope was for ever extinguished.

The place of meeting was almost under the shadow of Whitehall. As I entered the door I could hear the footsteps of the guard upon the pavement. The room was quite filled when I arrived. We were somewhat late. I was acquainted with the faces of some of those present, and there was a sudden pause in the conversation when their eyes fell upon me. There were at least twenty gentlemen present, and one very gaunt and pale sat at the head of the table, with a mass of papers before him. He had been reading from a list which he held in his hand as we entered, but he paused and waited until Leigh and myself came into the room, keeping his black, glittering eyes fixed upon me like one who would read me through. I kept modestly in the back-ground, but followed Leigh to the end of the room.

"I offer no apology, my lord," the latter said, "that

I am thus late. I have brought the friend of whom I spoke, and whose presence is my best excuse."

"Mr. Duncombe needs no introduction to those who love his majesty and would serve his cause. I am your servant, sir," said my lord, rising and bowing with a stately grace. "Though our ways have lain apart, I am not ignorant with what devotion and zeal you have served the king abroad. I know his majesty esteems you highly."

I bowed and was silent.

"God's wounds, Mr. Duncombe, I am glad to meet you here," cried another gentleman, holding out his hand to me across the table. "My son writ me from the Hague that you had stood by him very gallantly, and I think that he and I owe you more than we could conveniently discharge at present. But old Harry Killigrew does not forget his debts of honour. I'm rejoiced to make your acquaintance here."

Other flattering speeches were made which I knew were altogether undeserved, but there are few men, and especially young men, who are not moved by them. I confess that I was filled with delight to know that my name was not altogether unknown and forgotten in England. Fortune rather than merit had helped me once to serve the queen, and I knew that my action had made some little stir at the time, but I had believed it was now forgotten with the other useless history of the past.

I made the best reply I was able, but found, as is not unusual, little to say on my own behalf, and that little awkwardly enough. Then the debate returned to its former channel, and I listened with attention and eagerness. The scheme was so daring and simple, but left so much to chance, that I felt there was little room for reasonable hope. To restore the king to liberty and provide a vessel for his safe conveyance, was the only portion of the plan that lay plain before me; the rest was uncertain, and full of speculation, running underground in a way that I could not follow

or understand its course. But it was with the first part alone that I was concerned—a part so dangerous, and apparently impossible, that I could not see how it was to be accomplished. After a while my Lord Worcester turned to me.

“You have been absent from England so long, Mr. Duncombe, that I do not think you will be recognised. Many others have been suggested, but for one reason or another they have been found unsuitable. It is a hazardous service; are you willing to take all the risks?”

“The danger does not frighten me, my lord,” I answered; “but I do not yet know whether I am fitted to discharge the duty that is needed. I do not see it clearly.”

A dry smile passed over his lips.

“The main support and stay of our design has not yet arrived. You may rest content to know that our agent goes to Carisbrooke with such certificate as none can call in question. The high priest of all the fighting saints will avouch his character and write his commendation. He will find himself in close attendance on the king—a gaoler, yet a loyal subject; a guard, and yet the messenger of safety. In short, to have done with parables, we have found the means to have you appointed usher to his majesty, commissioned by the nation to spy upon his actions and to watch his person. None will suspect or question you; once within the walls you must take your own course; select such agents as you may find the fittest; spare neither promises nor money, and lay your plan of escape in such manner that it cannot fail. We shall endeavour to keep in constant communication with you, and when your scheme is ripe a vessel will be waiting without fail.”

“There is no risk of treachery?” said I, returning to my first suspicion.

“None. The traitor here would have too much to lose, and thinks he has too much to gain. I had

hoped he had been here ere now to answer for himself. He has come to meet us of his own free will and choice, and having come, he locks the door against retreat."

He saw the look of doubt upon my face.

"There need be no secret in the matter now, Mr. Duncombe. The eminent person of whom I speak is Cromwell himself."

I could scarcely realise the words I heard. The colossal figure with its spiritual fervour and tremendous force, that had so long dwelt dominant in my mind and imagination, refused to lend itself to the office of a traitor, or to play the part now suggested.

"Cromwell!" I cried, almost without thinking of my words. "My lord, you must pardon me. I risk all that is dear to me on this cast—my own life and his majesty's—and I must see my way from end to end. You do not want a blind agent, who dares not act because he cannot see, or looks for failure because his hands are tied by suspicion and doubt. I know not who suggested this, nor how the crooked path of politics is running here, but I know you cannot use this man for the purpose that you think."

My speech created a murmur of surprise, but I was so much in earnest and so full of settled conviction upon this point that it did not move me. I was determined to let no false shame or modesty stand in my way, but, before I embarked in the adventurous career marked out for me, to have a sure and stable ground to rest upon. I was now convinced that this was another wild scheme that credulity or treachery had set on foot, and though I had no doubt as to the sincerity and zeal of those who were here openly engaged in it, I now dreaded the invisible hands that were working secretly.

"I know not," I went on, "on what hopes or promises you are acting, but if this plan is his, you are doing his work, not he yours. I think I saw his

heart laid bare once. I would not care to set my life under his heel."

"You have raised the only ghost that can frighten my friend, my lord," said Leigh. "I forbore to mention names because I feared this ghost might startle him."

"I do not quarrel with Mr. Duncombe's fears," my lord answered, "for I own that at first I shared them myself. What motive prompted him I do not know, or only guess, but this I know, that by his means 'tis in our power to liberate the king. Once that is done, I would not trust him further."

"But is your lordship sure that Cromwell knows your purpose? A personal interview—a letter written under his own hand—"

"The saints have their own share of the wisdom of this world, but on this head there is no doubt. A trusted agent has set forth his views, which are merely those he laid himself before the king at Hampton. He fears the Parliament, who would be rid of him and all his following. God knows I do not blame them there. He finds the army growing mutinous and masterful, and in the king, with something for himself—the earldom of Essex and other trifles—the only settlement the times afford. We cannot choose our tools or quarrel with them."

"I would only be certain, my lord," I said, "that we can use them, but this has passed the power of my mind to grasp. I would be sure others have not made his name a cloak to cover their own designs."

"Noll works best with his hands in his neighbours' pockets," cried Killigrew. "Heaven knows he has emptied mine and my Lord Worcester's. If Mr. Duncombe had lived like some of us in England, he would have thought less of his saintship."

"I trust Mr. Duncombe's doubts will be resolved presently. Hitherto another hand has writ the messages and made the overtures, but we were led to

hope that he himself might visit us to-night. I am convinced so far, he means to aid us."

"Your lordship has had better means of judging his intentions than myself. Whatever he may mean, I know he means with all his strength."

"The devil has the reputation of being always in earnest," said my lord, who was something of a wit.

But for my own part I was less satisfied than ever. One of two doubts fought to be uppermost: either that Cromwell's name was used to bring his majesty into further disgrace, and utterly destroy the poor remnant of his party, or that Cromwell himself had some object to serve outside the scope and latitude of the project of my friends. That he was willing to restore the king and betray the cause which he himself had done so much to further—nay, of which he had himself become the axis upon which it turned—I could in no wise believe. All that I had seen of him—and then he played no actor's part—was wholly alien to such a course. But I own that I rather believed that he himself had no part in this, but that others played upon the credulity of my friends, and used his name to serve their own purpose. I was willing, however, to suspend my judgment for the present, being anxious to let no imaginary fears of my own stand in the way. I therefore became silent, feeling that I had not won upon my hearers by the doubts I had expressed, but resolved that neither enthusiasm nor loyalty should tempt me into a course that my judgment condemned.

Presently we heard a knocking beneath, and Leigh, who sat near, turned to me with a smiling face.

"The ghost walks after all. Even doubting Thomas may believe now."

I was now almost prepared to see Cromwell enter the chamber, for it was evident that he was himself expected; but in this hope I was disappointed. Instead there came in a gentleman very grave and

courteous, but who, I thought, seemed doubtful of the reception he was like to find. His dress was partly civil, partly military, but his air was by no means that of a man of the sword. I tried to read his face, but the sombre mask of his countenance betrayed no further expression than that of self-importance and hesitation. I saw my Lord Worcester endeavoured to conceal his disappointment under a show of welcome that sounded very cold and formal.

"There is no one," he said, "more welcome than yourself, but in a matter of so grave moment it is not well to deal with an agent, however trusted. I confess I am disappointed. General Cromwell has not seen good to favour us with his presence."

"It is, my lord, because the matter is of so great moment that General Cromwell is not here to-night. I need not tell your lordship how many jealous eyes watch his steps, nor how many enemies are continually plotting his ruin. One whisper of this design must utterly destroy him and you. I hope I am myself an honourable man; I have striven to keep my name untarnished, and did I for a moment doubt his sincerity and truth, I should speak my mind openly, regardless of the consequences. As this matter stands, he has already ventured into the deepest water."

"Rather," said my lord, "he stands upon the shore and watches us go wading beyond our depth. He has refused to see me, or anyone I named on my behalf; he has declined to place his views on paper; and even now, when the scheme is ripe for execution, he is still content to hold aloof. For my part, I do not doubt you, Dr. Watson; but it has been suggested to-night that others—I do not mean yourself—that, in short, his name is but a herring drawn across our path. This view I own had not suggested itself before."

"Nor can it now, my lord. I am this hour fresh

from his presence, and dissimulation could not go farther if his mind is not entirely yours and mine. He offers the king his liberty on such conditions as I have already informed you, and in the only way in which it is possible to achieve it. As to his good faith and my own, this promised letter is the best proof."

He handed the unsealed paper to the marquis, who read it through with knitted brows, as though weighing every word. When the latter had finished, he looked at me for a moment, and then placed the paper in my hands.

"The doubt which you had raised is now completely resolved, Mr. Duncombe. If you are familiar with the handwriting—I have seen it more than once when I liked it less—you can have no doubt as to the pen that wrote it. The signature is one that is not easily forgotten."

I had barely glanced at the writing before I knew that it was genuine; of that I was quite satisfied, though in some measure Dr. Watson's manner had already convinced me that he himself was perfectly sincere. I read the letter through again and again, as though I would find the writer's mind lying plain beneath the written words, which were few and to the point. It was addressed to Colonel Hammond in the castle at Carisbrooke, and after a brief greeting the writer commended the bearer as one eminently faithful and trustworthy, and fitted for the task of attending upon the king in such manner that the liberties of England were not likely to be endangered. Then followed a brief spiritual message, which seemed to me very shameless and blasphemous, in view of the secret intention with which this missive had been written. The letter, as I have said, was short, and nothing more was needed, if—and this was far from certain—a double treachery was not intended.

I handed it back without a word.

"You do not doubt the hand?"

"I have reason to avouch the signature," I answered. "Is Colonel Hammond also playing Cromwell's game? I have heard he favours him."

"There are none in Cromwell's secret but myself," Watson said, "and Hammond least of all. But I judge from your tone that you doubt the general's sincerity. There is only one Eye that can read all hearts, but upon my life and honour, I believe you wrong him. You cannot judge him by the standard by which you judge other men; he moves in an orbit of his own, and is swayed by feelings and moved by desires I have vainly sought to fathom. For my own part, I have hitherto stood with the people and Parliament of England; I have wrought my day's work in the field, but I have come to think if we are to enjoy the fruit of our labour, and bring home our sheaves in thankfulness, it can only be by the king's help, and under the security a settled government can give us. These are Cromwell's views as well as mine, though force of circumstance has drawn him among those who seek the king's death and the subversion of all order."

"I am only the poor agent," I answered, "whom my friends have thought not unsuited to this service; but I own I am little drawn toward the man who with the same wet pen deceives his friend and then prays for his soul's welfare."

"David saved the life of Saul," was the dry rejoinder, "yet he left the image in the bed. I doubt not Colonel Hammond will not suffer, and for the prayer to which you take exception, at least it cannot harm him. There are casuists who might say the letter speaks the truth throughout, though not unlikely to be misread."

"True or false," I said, "I am prepared to undertake the journey. If there is bye-play here I may be found a dangerous tool, and hard to handle. I have spoken my mind freely, because I am in

earnest, and would give more than I can say to succeed. In any case, I will do the best I can."

My lord was pleased to say that he thought no fitter agent could have been chosen, and I am inclined to think I had risen in his estimation by holding back so long. But, indeed, as sometimes happens, I took the resolution almost in the beating of a second, and had spoken the words before my mind had time to dwell upon them. I should once more see the king, and my very doubts might enable him to escape the designs of his enemies, if evil was intended. At least, I thought I might avoid committing him, and on one thing I was resolved—to depend wholly on myself, and accept assistance from no quarter that I could not implicitly trust. Once I had gained admittance to the king, my task was plain and simple, though one false or heedless step was certain to bring ruin upon myself, and perhaps on others. The king would place himself entirely in my hands—of that my friends were well advised. Among so many guards I could have little difficulty in finding some who might be bought at such price as I had it in my hands to pay, and being myself beyond suspicion, I could not fail to find the opportunity and means to arrange a certain passage from the castle.

When I look back upon this scheme and the hopes that moved us, I can only wonder at our blindness and credulity. But at that time I must own the further I considered the matter, the more reasonable and confirmed became my hope that we might be enabled to work the king's deliverance, either with the help of his enemies or without their aid. It may be that in some part of his nature a man always remains a boy, and when a great passion sways and masters him, he returns to the dreams and hopes that were wont to govern him when untutored by reason and experience. Certainly no lads ever nursed an idler dream than those who nourished this design,

and they not unskilled in the subtleties of politics and the vicissitudes of fortune.

A long conversation followed, in which various plans were proposed, and suggestions made; but the issue was too vague and indefinite to arrange anything with certainty. In the end, my instructions were that I should follow my own judgment, and find an agent by whose means I might from time to time communicate with my friends in Newport.

In this discussion Dr. Watson took no part, and though I watched him closely, I saw no desire upon his side that one plan should be adopted rather than another. Indeed, so far as he himself was concerned, I saw no reason to doubt his good faith, and I think his feelings toward myself were those of esteem and good-will.

When he left us, however, which he did early, a restraint seemed to be taken off the spirits of my friends; that wildness, which had shown in many a charge and midnight sally, broke out afresh, and the thing which we were risking our lives to do, already seemed accomplished with success. My own health was drunk with an enthusiasm that I did not share, for my mind was busied with those dangers and difficulties which grew and multiplied the more I considered them. It was late when we broke up, and that not till many toasts had been drunk and a hundred battles fought again.

When I returned to my lodging I could not sleep, but walked my room till the morning. Cromwell's letter lay upon the table—the hand of destiny pointing toward unknown and untrodden paths. If I could but read within the lines; if I could plumb the secret depths of that dark, unfathomable heart; if there was any clue to guide me through the mazes of his tortuous policy! But as I looked at the bold superscription on the envelope, there was no answer to my questions—no light upon the dark and perilous road. I had entered upon a journey without chart or com-

pass, but in no reckless or improvident spirit. I had weighed the chances; I had calculated the dangers. If Cromwell had laid this trap, I was resolved that none should suffer but myself, and, forearmed by my doubts and suspicions, that least of all should my attempt be turned against his majesty.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AGAIN THE KING.

HAVING once embarked in this undertaking, my friends very wisely left me to myself, to pursue my own plans and adopt my own courses. Being so long absent from England, and having at no time had a wide circle of acquaintance there, my person was altogether unknown, and I was desirous to avoid being found in communication with any whose action was likely to be suspected. In addition to this, no outside help was likely to profit me in my undertaking; in that I must trust to my own resources and to those aids which chance or fortune might afford me within. I therefore journeyed southward alone without accident or adventure, and eight days after the events set out in the last chapter of this book, came to Carisbrooke in the afternoon of the day.

On my arrival, Colonel Hammond received me with some surprise, but, whatever his private feelings, at first with perfect respect. I saw in a moment that he, at least, had not been made privy to the scheme. In all likelihood he looked upon me as a spy set upon his own actions, and an additional safeguard to secure his fidelity; but of that he gave me no hint or intimation. He read the letter which I gave him with a grave composure that he may not have felt, and then placed it in his breast without a word regarding its contents.

For a brief moment, while I stood before him, I felt almost ashamed of my purpose, based as it was on deceit and treachery; but the feeling lasted only for a second. Rather I strove to gauge his character and discover his weaknesses, which was difficult to do, owing to the mask of settled gravity that he constantly wore. But I came rapidly to the conclusion that I should find him rather a means than an obstacle to securing the object I was desirous to effect. I was certain that his loyalty to his masters was not to be shaken; but I judged, whether rightly or wrongly, that he had little love for his task of guarding the king's person, and was in doubt whether his commission in reality ran from the Army or the Parliament. A simple soldier, rather than a dark and secret plotter, he might prove vigilant, but not suspicious, and being uncertain of his ground, might be the more easily worked upon. I therefore assumed an air of mysterious importance, which had its effect upon him, and I afterwards learned that I could have adopted no wiser or more prudent course.

"The writer," I said, "is able at present to add nothing further to what he says. As you know, he is merely the agent by whose hands I am sent hither, but I am instructed to say you will hear further as to the object of my coming at an early date."

"I do not quarrel, sir, with your commission," he answered; "but I had been easier had I known the cause. I do not care to walk in the dark, and I would not have my conduct suspected. 'Tis well known that I am not in love with my duty, but that does not prevent my discharging it faithfully."

"I have not heard you doubted," I answered, "nor am I here to watch your steps or carry tales to my masters. General Cromwell is your friend?"

"My faithful friend."

I smiled inwardly.

"Your friend has sent me hither. I am but his

eyes and hands. It has been said"—I paused and looked at him boldly—"that an attempt is about to be made to carry off the king."

"An idle story. I have heard nothing else since he has been placed in my charge. Is Carisbrooke a cheese, to be nibbled through with mice? I would not have you think I regret your coming—"

"Nor suspect the minds of those who sent me here. Their doubts may be groundless—on your assurance I will suppose they are—but the king's safe keeping is essential to the welfare of the kingdom, and you cannot quarrel with the fears that prompt additional precaution."

"I do not quarrel, sir, with any arrangement that may be made, but I hope the king, toward whom I bear no malice, is well secured."

"Colonel Hammond, my duty is no pleasanter than your own. My sole instructions are to wait upon the person of the king, to watch him closely, and to keep as near as may be to his presence. I, also, bear him no ill-will, nor, I think, do those who sent me here; but I frankly admit I would that another had been chosen, for, like yourself, I have no wish to play the gaoler. I can only say it is my duty."

I spoke very quietly, and I could see that my manner impressed him. For some time he did not speak; then he turned to me suddenly—

"From what quarter is the danger suspected?"

"The little that I know," I answered, "I have no authority to speak. Possibly the whole is mere matter of suspicion. You can rely upon the guard?"

"My own honour depends upon their fidelity. They were chosen carefully."

"One rotten link destroys the chain," I said; "but you must judge, not I."

"I have exercised my judgment, and until you have shown me I am wrong, I stand upon my

judgment. At present, at least, there is but one master here."

"We are both servants," I said, knowing that the greater firmness I showed, the greater freedom I should afterwards enjoy, "and responsible to the same power. I am not here to set myself against you, but in all things to co-operate and place myself at your disposal. I would be your friend and helpmate."

He looked at me for the first time as though taking my entire measure, and with an ill-concealed glance of contempt that I did not fail to note. Henceforward I knew I should be little troubled by his presence, and that those very suspicions he entertained regarding me would effectually remove any doubts regarding my real object and design. He had already set me down as the secret hireling of the king's enemies and his own, and his involuntary expression of his disgust curiously dispelled any lingering regret that I had conceived of deceiving him and, it might be, destroying his career. While I remained in Carisbrooke I knew that when we met we should meet as almost avowed enemies.

He rose from his seat as if willing to end our interview.

"Will you see the king now?" he said.

"With your permission," I answered, "I will wait upon him at supper, at whatever hour that may be. I would not have him to suppose I was sent here to watch and chronicle his movements. It would altogether spoil my usefulness."

"You must exercise your own discretion."

He turned upon his heel, and left me without another word. Notwithstanding my situation, I felt the hot blood burn in my face at the tone he used in thus addressing me, for speech could not have gone further in conveying indifference and contempt. But I consoled myself with the thought that this pragmatical

soldier and myself would yet stand on equal terms before my business was finished. I knew that I was right in refusing to see the king as Hammond had proposed. Had I now permitted myself to be presented to him, there were a thousand chances that his sudden recognition of myself would attract attention. This was a danger I was especially anxious to avoid, though, after all, it was not unlikely the king had quite forgotten my face. But I determined to run no risks, and, therefore, waited patiently till I was told his majesty's supper was about to be served.

This service was still performed with some ceremony though with no great state, and I passed into the apartment with some half-dozen other attendants.

I cannot convey to you any sense of the feelings with which I entered the room, and saw the broken, discrowned king, whom I still loved and honoured. He was seated by the window, his head resting wearily upon his hand, and his eyes fixed with a vacant look upon some distant object beyond the grated window. I had never beheld a change so great and pitiful. When I had last seen him misfortune and failure had already written themselves in legible characters upon his face. But now he was like one who stood face to face with a final sorrow. His frame was bowed and wasted, his cheeks were drawn and almost death-like in their pallor, and his hair was now nearly white. No man could have looked upon this picture without feeling moved to tears, and I know the moisture gathered in my own eyes as I watched him.

When I came in he was sunk in so deep a reverie that he appeared to see nothing that transpired round him. His eyes were fixed on the distant image that filled his mind, and his lips moved in the dialogue of his secret thoughts. Even when he sat down at table his thoughts had hardly returned to the outside world; we were only so many shadowy figures in a dream, so shadowy that it did not fill

his mind. His eyes fell upon myself two or three times, but his look passed from me, and the expression of his face remained unchanged. I saw that my presence was unnoticed.

The attendants moved silently about the room, or talked only in whispers, for an outward respect was still shown toward the king, that I never saw broken during my stay. Indeed, I think his untoward lot won their sympathy, and that those who waited upon him were moved only by respect and pity.

When the meal was nearly finished in this unbroken silence, an incident happened that had almost betrayed me and destroyed my plan. I had taken a ewer from one of the attendants, and was reaching across the table, when by an awkward movement I overturned the salt. The king observed the accident, and looked at me with a very faint and shadowy smile.

"There was a time," he said, "before we grew too wise, when we had thought that this presaged—"

Here he stopped, and the smile died completely out of his face. His eyes were fixed on me in terror and astonishment. His hand hung for a moment suspended, and his face grew deadly pale. He tried to speak, but his tongue refused its office, and the words would not come. The sudden recognition, so unexpected and under such circumstances, had robbed him of all power of speech. I thought that he was about to swoon, but he almost immediately controlled his feelings, and soon regained his natural composure, while I endeavoured to repair the damage I had done, without seeming to notice his condition. Holding his napkin to his lips, he looked at me steadily.

"I think yours is a new face," he said, in a cold and measured tone. "I am so little used to change that any novelty affects me now, and I was satisfied with

such service as I had. If you are to wait upon me, be more careful for the future."

He had quite regained his usual manner, and looked at me without the least sign of recognition, and with some severity.

I knew that the eyes of the attendants were on me, and that everything would be reported to the least circumstance. I therefore drew myself up, as though in resentment at the king's reprimand, and answered shortly:

"'Twas but a common accident. I am not used to wait at table, sir."

"Even upon kings. 'Twas honourable service once, but now it cannot harm to wait upon misfortune. That has claims that royalty no longer boasts. My friend, I do not blame you."

"If there is any blame, it lies with those who sent me here. I will do my best to wait upon you, sir."

"No man can do more than that. I see you love this Carisbrooke as little as myself. The time moves slowly here; the hands upon the dial go round but once a week. You come from—"

"I can answer no questions, sir."

"*Væ victis!*" he said, with a mournful smile. "I had forgotten; the prisoner has no right to interrogate his gaoler."

"Neither gaoler nor prisoner, sir," I answered. "Your majesty is only awaiting the peaceful settlement of a great question, and abide here only for your own good and your people's."

"The usual formula. I have no doubt we shall be excellent friends."

He said no more, but continued his meal. He was no longer, however, listless and despondent, but, as I could very well see, trembled with suppressed excitement. His eyes were no longer dull, and his pale cheeks were slightly flushed. Immediately his gaze had rested upon me with attention he had

recognised me, and the recognition had awakened his hope and expectation. I knew that he could explain my presence in no other way than that an attempt was being made to effect his escape, and I admired the self-command with which he had controlled his first feelings of surprise and astonishment. Certainly, after the first brief display of emotion, no one could have suspected the relationship between us, and I felt that my own manner had fully borne out the part I had assumed. Indeed, if I had erred at all, it was upon the side of severity; but the king very adroitly turned this to my advantage.

When the supper was finished the king rose and walked to the window. Here there stood a small table, with a chess-board and the pieces scattered upon it. His majesty began to arrange the men with a negligent air, and then lifting the king, held it open in his palm.

"You have given me one lesson, sir, and I will give you another in return—the royal game of chess—the little game of life. The common pawn that moves one petty step, and does his useful work and dies forgotten; the forward castle, the rampant knight, the wily bishop, moving with a sidelong sweep; the queen that rules the board, and here the king, that all are seeking to destroy, and yet who cannot flee but one poor step—the first and yet the weakest of them all. There is no reason why I should not teach you this, and make a friend besides?"

"I know of none," I answered. "I am here, sir, to do your pleasure in all things lawful."

I did not know that this was the king's favourite amusement, and the chief means of relieving the tedium of his captivity; but I saw that his request caused no surprise, and my brusque acquiescence was looked upon as a matter of course. He continued to place the pieces upon the board, but I saw that his fingers trembled as he laid them down. I knew that

he was waiting with a burning impatience until we were alone, and that the delay of the attendants in removing the dishes tried him sorely. These certainly suspected nothing, and left us entirely to ourselves in the sunny corner of the room. I stood watching the king while he continued placing the pieces, white and black mingled together in his disquietude of mind. He was now outwardly perfectly calm, more composed even than myself, but I was able to judge his feelings in some slight measure by my own. He sat with his head resting upon one hand until the remains of the supper had been removed and the last servant had left the room. The door was closed, and we were now perfectly alone.

He hardly waited an instant till he leaped to his feet, his face glowing with joy and hope, and advancing to me, laid both his hands upon my shoulders. His voice was shaken by the strength of his emotions, and his eyes were filled with womanly tears.

"My faithful friend—" He was unable to say more.

"Your majesty's most faithful subject," I answered, as much moved as himself.

"You have come from France—from the queen?"

"Ten days ago from France, but last from London."

"And her majesty—your eyes have seen her—is she well and happy? I have been living in the utmost desert, and I thirst for the news you bring me."

"The queen was well and—and happy."

Through all his dark and stormy fortunes his love still burned clear and sweet, unshaken by tempest, undimmed by calamities. Even now it had prompted his first question; it had lifted him above his prison cares. And my mind, even while I stood there, was filled with the pity of it—the loving husband—the careless wife, the hard, cold and unfeeling heart that

scorned and flouted the love it could not understand or measure.

"You hesitate, man, and would keep something back from me. Do not spare me; I am used to suffer. Let me hear your tidings."

"I hope I bring nothing but good news," I answered. "When your majesty has grown calmer, I will tell you all. We may be interrupted, and there is deadly peril in my presence here for both of us."

"My time is measured with an iron chain; we are safe from interruption for an hour. But you are right; this has quite unmanned me. I remember—"

"I bring the future, not the past, your majesty," I said, reading his weakness in his face, and fearing another outburst; "hope, not remembrance."

"Hope?"

"Hope is not yet dead."

"Let her die, the incestuous mother of despair."

"Rather let her live," I answered, "the angel of a new and splendid time."

He was still standing, and I pointed toward the chair from which he had risen. Like a child, or like a man, rather, who has wholly lost his will, he resumed his seat, and I sat down opposite to him on the other side of the table. I saw now how far his royal spirit had been broken, and I knew that, whatever resource and courage were needed, I must find in myself, and in myself alone. The struggle with misfortune that hardens and sours some men, had left him weak and incapable of action—the creature of his momentary moods—and therefore the more difficult to handle. Indeed, I concluded that there were now a thousand chances that he would betray me by a thoughtless word or look, and if we had been interrupted at this moment, my real character could not have failed to have been discovered. This, at least, I was anxious to

prevent, and I therefore assumed a manner that by no means corresponded with my feelings at the time.

"I have again become your gaoler, sire," I said, "and for your own safety you must strive to act the prisoner even in private."

"Use has made the task an easy one."

"The task is drawing to a close," I said, arranging the pieces, and keeping my eyes fixed upon the board. "Your majesty proposed to teach me something of this game of chess—I think you said the little game of life. It has occurred to your friends, who sent me hither, that it might be played in this way—you see the pieces are all upon the board. The king is held in check by yonder castle, and cannot move for this ugly pawn. He need not despair, for there is help at hand. The knight that has been overlooked takes the castle, and the game begins again."

"But stay; the king loses his knight."

"Let him go," I answered, "so long as the king is safe. The parable is easily read."

I do not think he quite comprehended the hidden meaning of my words, for he kept his eyes fixed upon me doubtfully, and seemed to wait for a further explanation. Or it may be that he hesitated to follow the adventurous course my words suggested, continual misfortune having lessened that natural hope that keeps men's hearts alive. However this may be, his face expressed merely doubt and hesitation.

With my arms resting upon the table, and my hand upon the board, I began my story in very sober prose, detailing at some length the views of his friends and the hopes they had formed of effecting his escape. I omitted nothing, nor did I hesitate to point out the dangers which he and I ran in carrying out the project. He listened to me very patiently, never once interrupting me, nor

apparently greatly stirred, till I came to that portion of the narrative where Cromwell entered upon the scene. Then his interest quickened, and I saw his admiration depicted upon his face. I thought then, and I think now, that there was something in the undercurrent of this plot that attracted and fascinated him. At any rate, he never seemed to doubt the sincerity of Cromwell's service, and when I ventured to suggest that my suspicions were still alive, he put the thought aside with a grave smile. He compelled me to repeat myself again and again, that he might lose none of the details, and finally rose from his chair, overcome by the excess of his emotion.

"You have nothing more to tell me, Mr. Duncombe?"

"Nothing, sire. I have told you all. The rest is with you and me."

"And God, in whose right hand are the lives and hearts of kings. No man has been more tossed by storms and tempests than myself. I have not complained, for it was the will of Heaven—but I think the light is breaking now, though where and how I cannot tell. But I know Cromwell—there is no wiser head and falser heart in England. When he would leave his party, that can no longer serve him; and taking part with me, he sees advantage and preferment in my service. They say the rats will leave a sinking ship, and most men love a rising not a failing cause. Knowing nothing more, I know the sign and accept the omen."

"But should we fail?" I said doubtfully.

"Then would he deny me like another Judas, and crush me as the worm beneath his heel. Courage, sir, we will not fail."

His mood had changed again; the difficulties that were to be surmounted, the dangers that surrounded us, vanished into thin air, and he already in anticipation enjoyed his victory over his enemies.

The doors of his prison were open; his foes were at his feet. I sat silent, with my heart full of pity for the dreams that every captive dreams in the midst of his captivity. I sat silent, and permitted him to enjoy his vision. When he had finished, he laid his hand upon mine with a gentle pressure.

"You have come," he said, "like light in the darkness, like music in the midst of weeping. It is not the least part of sorrow that it helps a man to know his faithful friends. Do not blame me if I cannot speak the thoughts that fill my heart, but some time I may have the power to show that Charles Stuart is not all forgetfulness."

I raised his hand to my lips.

"If your majesty were free, my desires were easily satisfied."

"One step at a time," he said lightly. "It is something in one day to have found hope and a friend."

He rose and walked to the grated window. The night had fallen rapidly, and the shadows were gathering themselves into the darkness. I could not see his face, but only his figure, where he stood. He was silent for a great space, and then he turned round suddenly.

"You do not fear to serve me?"

"Fear?" I cried.

"My service has been fatal to my servants. Where my love has been bestowed it has brought but death and ruin. My friendship has been still an evil star. The man I loved the best I could not save, and now I hesitate—"

"The past is dead," I said. "I am here to help your majesty to build the future, and am prepared to run the risk of serving you. With your permission I will take my leave and order lights. Darkness is a desponding counsellor."

I left him still standing by the window, and passed into the antechamber, where I found the guard about

to be relieved. The officer upon duty, with a regard, as I imagined, to the character I had assumed, invited me to his room ; but I pleaded fatigue after my long journey, which was little more than the truth. This I did very civilly, for I knew not where or when I might meet with a friend ; but my interview with the king, so far from encouraging, had depressed me beyond measure. It was, no doubt, true that I had succeeded in the first, and what had seemed to me the most difficult, portion of the plan I was chosen to carry out.

I had effected my entrance into the castle as a trusted, if not an honoured agent, and I had secured the right of being hourly with the king. I was free to act as I pleased ; no suspicion, so far as I could see, attached to my movements, and my assumed authority had given me a real, if secret, power. But I saw that I could look for no assistance from the king himself. It was my farthest hope that he might, at least, prove passive in my hands, if he did not fail altogether when the moment came for decisive action. Heaven knows I had only pity in my heart, and his weakness and vacillation bound me only the more firmly to his service. His mind was filled not so much with the memory of his wrongs, as with dead hopes and regrets, and the new hope that I had awakened, instead of quickening his activity into life, had only begotten new dreams that did not stir him into action.

Being, therefore, in no mood for company, I left Captain Frost in the antechamber and passed into the corridor, which was now quite dark. I thought I knew my way, but I must have taken the wrong turn, for I walked a good while without coming upon a light.

As I walked I thought I heard the sound of footsteps behind me, and so convinced I became of this that I suddenly stopped short and listened. As

I stopped, I heard a footfall, very light, on the stone pavement, and that stopped also. I called out, but there was no response. Full of suspicion, I resumed my walk, determined to know at once whether I was followed thus early, and walking now very softly, halted again. The footsteps behind me continued until my pursuer was quite close to me, but there came a sudden pause in the darkness. I had now no doubt in my mind. A good way farther on was an abrupt turn, and here a lamp was suspended by a nail against the wall.

At this point I resolved to discover if possible who was dogging my steps, and once more following the passage, turned the corner. I found here a window or recess (I do not know which it was) covered by a heavy curtain, and I stepped behind this. I waited a while, and again heard the swift, silent footsteps, and the sound of a deep-drawn breath. Just as the sound came opposite the curtain where I stood—within two paces of me—I opened the folds, and my hand fell heavily upon a figure that crouched and ran. Before my hand had tightened its grasp I heard a little shriek of alarm or surprise that was instantly suppressed ; but not before I knew that it was a woman who had followed me.

“What does this mean ?” I cried, without relaxing my hold.

“Both our lives,” she whispered, raising her head and placing her hand upon my lips. The dim yellow light shone fair upon her upturned face so that I could see every line of the countenance thus revealed to me. I started back, and cried out in dismay, feeling as though I was caught by some dream from which I was struggling to awaken. The woman who stood before me with the look of warning in her face was no other than my old sweetheart, Melody Leigh.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FOOL'S PLANS.

MY astonishment was so great that I was unable to speak for some time. My mind refused to admit the evidence of my eyes; I was so much moved that I could feel neither pleasure nor regret at our meeting here. In all the accidents of change and chance this seemed the most remote and incredible. That she had been drawn within the vortex of conspiracy never once occurred to me, though, indeed, I did not speculate at all on the reason of her presence here, but stood staring as though she had been an apparition. How long I might have stood thus I do not know, when she made a little, impatient movement with her hand, and withdrew herself from my grasp that I had not relaxed.

"Am I dreaming or awake?" I cried. "I hardly know which."

"Have I changed so much that you do not know me yet?"

"But to meet you here—in Carisbrooke, and after years of waiting—"

"And silence."

"And silence and unfaltering love."

I could not help myself. Had all the world depended on the step, I must have taken it. Overcome by my feelings, I stepped forward and caught

her in my arms, pressing her throbbing bosom to my own. She offered no resistance, and then raised her face to mine. For the first time since childhood, I kissed my dear mistress on the lips, and I knew that through good report and evil she had loved me wholly. For a little time we stood silent, and then she gently disengaged herself from my embrace, and placed her hand upon my arm.

"We have not come to Carisbrooke to indulge in April hopes. Here is no house of dreams. The king—he has consented?"

"Then you know why I am here?"

"I know everything. I thought that Percival had told you."

"He was discreetly silent," I said bitterly. "He might at least have spared his sister. Melody, you do not know the nature of the business I have entered on. To fail is to lose all. I can risk everything but you."

"The Leighs have not hitherto spared themselves," she answered, "and here a woman's wit may be of service to you. The plan was mine, and if I do not aid I shall not hinder you. You must find a messenger to our friends without, and who is fitter than the humble maid whom none suspect to have a mind beyond her mop and broom? Even here we are lovers—not conspirators. I have suffered more than this, and—and I am near you, Tom, and working with you."

"You ever knew the way to my heart, Melody," I said sadly, "but indeed, here is no task for you. Iron, not silk, is the fabric we are working in."

"And silk may prove the stronger when all is said and done. I have thought and planned, and though you did not know the truth, 'twas I that brought you here. I could not even spare the man I loved. There is no need to think of me. I am

but a forward minx who meets her lover in the dark, and only like to lose my name for modesty. I have the privilege of my sex to go and come, and men may help a woman where they would not help a king."

"Never that," I cried with energy. "If we are to work together you must trust to me alone. One false step may ruin all."

"Your worship must have everything," she said, smiling faintly. "Can you not trust me, Tom?"

"I have trusted you with my whole heart," I said, "but I cannot forget you are a woman."

"Even a woman has her uses. Do not think that I forget my weakness; heaven knows, I remember that too often, but I would lay down my life for the king."

"The old Melody," I said sadly. "We cannot help ourselves."

I yielded to her as I had been accustomed to yield all my life, but I recoiled in dismay from the idea that she should involve herself in the dark and tortuous paths in which I was walking, and led to such unknown and dangerous issues. I knew that she herself had no fear, and that her loyalty, which had been still a great and splendid passion, would shrink from no sacrifice and hesitate at no danger. But as I have said, there was no help for it. Her presence, as I now learned, was a part of the original design which had been kept back from me, and which had seemed vital to the execution of the whole plan. And indeed, apart from my own feelings in exposing her to those risks which I willingly undertook for myself, no fitter or more useful agent could have been discovered. I had now found a means of communicating with my friends outside without the fear of discovery or the risk of treachery. And as she herself had pointed out, suspicion was little likely to fasten upon a woman in a design of such

weight and moment. Altogether, could I have overcome my fears for her safety, I should have welcomed her assistance, for I knew that while she saw her duty in the light of her romantic loyalty, her discretion and swift wit would prove of infinite service. But she herself had left me no choice; all that I could now do was to see that she ran no unnecessary risk, and make her part as easy as lay within my power.

I saw that her eyes were fixed on me as I made up my mind, and I saw the resolute look in her sweet face.

"Your eyes, at least," I said, "are innocent of plots and deep designs. Melody, Melody, love is better than ambition and intrigue."

"Ambition! I saw the king's face from his window three nights ago, and if I ever was ambitious that had turned me for ever. The man I love must save the king I love. You have seen and spoken with him—have you told him all?"

"All I know," I answered; "if I know all."

"And he is willing; he consents?"

"Willing to be free, unwilling to decide. The vessel that has lost its helm and sails is carried by the wind and tide. He has lost his will and resolution; his heart is broken."

"I read it in his face; it haunts my very dreams."

"God knows," I said, "I do not wonder. It was the saddest sight I ever saw. But I think he will place his decision in my hands, and it only now remains for me to find the means. The man—"

"Hist!" cried Melody, catching my arm, "there is some one coming."

We stepped back within the curtain in whose shadow we had been standing, and waited until the footsteps drew near. Then Captain Frost passed us with a light in one hand and a book in the other, and went slowly down the corridor. We waited some

time after, till he had disappeared quite out of sight, and then, fearing lest we might be discovered by one whose eyes were keener, I hastily bade Melody good-night, and we went our different ways.

It is not my purpose to set down in detail the events of the next ten days that I spent in Carisbrooke. For the most part my hours were passed in the king's apartments, or in stolen interviews with Melody Leigh. In the main part of my design I made, or seemed to make, no progress. Fearful lest a chance word might breed suspicion, as yet I hung back from making overtures to any, and while I had grown to be familiar with the guards, I had formed no friendship that would bear the strain I might seek to place on it. But of this I did not despair, and meanwhile my presence had brought the king new life and hope.

I have heard men call him hard and cold and false; heaven alone knows how they misjudged his gentle heart. Though his mind was, for the most part, despairing and hopeless of the future, he expressed no regret at any step he had taken, but rather a serene and sublime faith in his own cause and its divine justness. From this he never moved; from this he could not be shaken. I marvelled at this great constancy in one whose character in other respects was so weak and feminine; at times it seemed to transfigure him into a stature equal to his fate and the height of the great tragedy in which he was the chief actor, and to raise to heroic proportions one fitted by nature rather for the graces and courtesies of life. For the most part I could see that he clung to myself with a confidence truly touching. I represented for him the love and loyalty from which his prison walls separated him, and was, as it were, the link that kept him still in contact with all he loved, and all who loved him. I did not think it possible that anyone could suspect the true relationship between

us. In the presence of others he treated me coldly and even with severity; it was only when we were alone that he opened his heart, and we became not king and subject, but a pair of friends, drawn closer by misfortune, and related by our common hopes and fears.

I saw Colonel Hammond seldom, and then only in the most formal and occasional manner. He was always distant and reserved, and though I had no cause to complain of his treatment, I knew my presence was distasteful to him—a matter he did not seek in any way to disguise or conceal. For my own part I took no pains to overcome his dislike, but treated him as though I knew I was here against his will, and acted under an authority superior to his own.

I was thus left with an absolute freedom to go and come as I pleased, and finally the care of the king's person was left entirely in my hands, with liberty to make such disposition as I pleased.

But there was one man who, from the first, had striven to ingratiate himself with me, and by many small acts of kindness and attention had shown me that he desired my friendship. This was Captain Frost, who was a person of some importance, and who, though a rough soldier, had a certain frank, outspoken manner that set me at my ease in his society. There was nothing ostentatious in his friendly overtures; they were only pleasant and natural, and I unconsciously fell into the habit of passing the evening in his room when my duty with the king was over for the day. I never dreamt for a moment that I should find any help in him, or that I could make him useful in the execution of my design. His nature seemed altogether unfitted for such purpose—plain, downright, and out-spoken, with little of that sanctimonious manner, which—though I have been sometimes wrong—has always led me to suspect hypocrisy and a double nature.

He had seen a good deal of hard service, and our conversation turned largely upon the fortunes of the war that he had followed almost to its close.

It had struck me as curious that in one so free to talk of himself he had manifested no interest in my past, and had never questioned me with regard to my own antecedents. In addition to this he had carefully avoided the subject of my present duty, but had seemed to take it for granted that I had little interest in my task, and was desirous of more congenial employment. But I felt absolute security in his society. Certainly, I thought, this frank and open soldier has no mind that suspicion loves to breed and harbour in—craft does not look out of eyes so honest; subtlety does not speak in tones so plain and clear. I thought I had made a friend, not an accomplice—a comrade, not a confederate. And therefore my astonishment was the greater when that happened which I am about to set out.

I had been in Carisbrooke ten or twelve days at the time, and Frost and myself had grown on most familiar terms. We were sitting together in his little room sometime near midnight, and I thinking that it was bedtime, for we had been together since ten o'clock. I had risen to my feet and was about to take my departure, when he suddenly motioned to me to sit down.

"I have been thinking over the matter," he said, "and I do not think I should remain silent longer."

"What matter?" I cried in astonishment.

"My mind," he answered, disregarding my question, "is slow to jump, and the leap took me close upon a week. At the first motion I had almost gone straight to Hammond."

He was unmoved and pleasant, but I felt instinctively that he played with a secret which he felt gave him power over me. I cannot describe my feelings; I knew that in some way or other the man

held the clue in his hands. Bewilderment, fear, despair, all possessed me for the moment, but I was desirous to learn how much he knew, and I made up my mind then and there that he should never leave the room alive with his secret in my keeping. But I mastered my emotions and looked at him coldly.

"I do not understand you," I said.

"You do, perfectly. It is wisest not to play with me. I have already conceived an admiration for your wisdom ; you are not deserving it."

"When you make your meaning clear I shall try to answer you."

"Then I shall begin at the beginning—you will have no difficulty in following me. I had an interest in the family of Duncombe since an English gentleman of that name rescued certain jewels of the late Queen of England in the city of Amsterdam, and nearly succeeded in concealing his gallant adventure. When you arrived at Carisbrooke I, therefore, watched you with interest for the admiration I bear your—namesake, and I observed—you see how things fall out—that which increased my interest. You were not a stranger to the king—faces are the only books I read, and though they lie at times, at times they speak the truth. The king already knew you, and your coming was not unwelcome. That was strange, and set me thinking. But your circle of acquaintances was greater even than I thought. There is a maid whose face is not to be forgotten, and whom I first saw here a little earlier than yourself. You can judge again of my surprise when I chanced upon my man and maid alone at night, and talking like a pair of ancient friends—lovers, I had almost said. That again was strange, and gave me further thought. I did not give my loose suspicions tongue, but waited and watched. The maid has been to Newport not once or twice, and for a modest girl has curious—Mr. Duncombe,

I will not further beat about the bush—I know all.”

I leaped to my feet.

“Sit down, man, and listen to me. There is murder in your eyes, but you could not kill me here. That would ruin all.”

“What would you do?”

“I do not know. I will tell you later. You see we have become familiars, and I hoped that you might speak and save me the explanation I have given you. You did not think me worthy of your confidence. A word to Hammond now—”

“You will never speak that word?”

“Perhaps. You at least cannot prevent it, though you may try. These ancient walls have ears. It was a daring project.”

His tone throughout was conciliatory and his manner that of one still doubtful how he would act. I knew that he was right when he said that I could not silence him by force, for the least outcry would be overheard, and I therefore waited that I might see in what direction his mind was moving. He also had risen to his feet, and now stood between me and the door. This position he seemed to have taken naturally and without premeditation, but it effectually secured his retreat.

“I would prove a useful friend,” he said at length; “I should be found a dangerous enemy. It rests with yourself which you will have me.”

“What would you have me do?”

“What you please; I shall not counsel you. I am poor and indifferent honest after a fashion, but in any case, I hold a secret that I can turn to my advantage. If you refuse to use my services, the Parliament will pay a trifle for the news I bring them. On the other hand, should you succeed, the king will not forget his friends and promises. I should prefer to serve the king. No doubt the risk is greater, but the risk will bear a larger rate of interest.”

"You travel rapidly," I said, "and hardly give me time to speak. You have spoken your suspicions—where is your proof of this wild tale?"

"Proof," he laughed. "In your presence here and that of Mistress Leigh—in your life and history—nay, most of all, in the very letter that you brought to Hammond. You know best how that came into your hands, but do you think that Cromwell will now avouch the signature or acknowledge the bearer? Proof! when I have told the story, the proof will not rest on me."

I knew he spoke the truth. The merest suspicion would ruin me. I must now employ this man or silence him, for I could not afford to defy him, and it was now as safe to purchase his aid as his silence. I do not think I should so long have hesitated to accept his offer, but for the one circumstance that had struck me as so curious. He had watched and followed me for nearly a fortnight, with this knowledge in his mind, and had dropped no hint, nor betrayed his suspicions even by a look. But accident had put him in possession of my real character. Whatever doubt I might have as to his fitness and fidelity, there was no choice left open to me. Chance, not design, had furnished me with the means I had been seeking for, and save for certain vague misgivings, there was no reason why I should not have been satisfied. In any case, I should have been compelled to purchase the assistance of the person I employed, and it was not more against the agent that he had made a voluntary offer, founded upon self-interest as it was. Besides, I had a liking for the man; and, indeed, I think it was my revulsion of feeling at the sudden exhibition of his baseness which I had never suspected that made me hesitate.

"I have made up my mind," I said at length. "I accept your offer."

A faint look of relief came over his face.

"You have acted wisely."

"The event will prove that," I answered, "but this I can promise, should we succeed your fortune is made. Should we fail—"

"We will not fail. There is no one in Carisbrooke but myself who even dreams what I have seen—you do not wholly trust me. You think that he who sells his masters will not hesitate to bargain for his friends."

I looked at him without replying.

"You are right in that. One motive drives you, another me, and I shall see that we succeed because I want the payment for my work. I have been cheek by jowl with poverty too long not to seize this opportunity. I knew your wit would not reject my offer, and I have thought it out—"

"If," I said, "the king approves—"

"The king! Yours must be the master-spirit, mine the hands. The king has played with accident too long to decide or choose now. We will have him aboard that French sloop I have been watching almost before he knows 'tis done."

"What do you propose?"

"Simplicity has still a double share of cunning. Warn your friends when to expect his majesty's arrival. A file like this will eat through the bar of his window in an hour, and once he is in the courtyard there is nothing to prevent Captain Frost, the servant of the Parliament, and their unknown friend, passing through the postern in the dark. 'Tis easy as to wink."

I almost held my breath; if I could rely upon this man's fidelity, nothing could be easier or more practicable. Many dangers which I had foreseen would be wholly obviated, the chance of betrayal by the larger employment of several agents would be lessened, and our preparations could all be made within a few hours. I watched the expression

upon Frost's face ; I weighed the tones of his voice ; I endeavoured to put myself in his place. Certainly if he had any thought of betraying me in his heart, it was not written on his face ; no man ever looked more straightforward and honest. My doubts began to disappear as I watched him. I felt that he had most of all to gain by serving me, and—I fell into the cunningest trap that ever was set to catch a man who prided himself on his wisdom and caution.

I reached out my hand, which he caught and wrung with fervour ; neither of us spoke for a space. And then, before I left, I made him swear upon the Four Gospels, which lay upon his table, and he took the oath with great willingness and perfect frankness.

When I look back upon this episode now, I feel that there was no other course left open to me but to trust him, and that it was not in any wise due either to my credulity or shortness of sight that he was able to afford the king's enemies the opportunity they were seeking. I learnt afterwards, in Leigh's phrase, and in quite another sense, how deep the design ran ; but meeting the danger in this frank and smiling guise, it never occurred to me that this was exactly the plot I had feared and the peril I had dreaded. So little, indeed, was this the case, that when I quitted Captain Frost's room, I felt I had found the very man I needed, and that Fortune had favoured me beyond my hopes.

CHAPTER XXVI

A CASTLE OF SAND.

ON the morning following this ill-starred compact, I was present at the interview between his majesty and my new associate, having first gently broken the news to the king that I had found the assistance I had been looking for.

The near prospect of again putting forth upon the stormy sea of action seemed at first to shake and terrify him; but when I brought Captain Frost into the apartment, he had quite recovered his composure, and received the latter with a quiet serenity and new cheerfulness. Indeed, the king's manner was now beyond all praise. If any doubt or suspicion dwelt in his mind, there was no trace of this in his words and looks, but rather the assurance that he was perfectly satisfied with Frost's fidelity and power to help him.

Yet his manner was not that of one on whom a favour was being conferred, but who accepted merely as a natural right these offers of assistance and promises of service. He never once suggested that this aid was to be purchased, and yet very delicately and adroitly held out such hope of reward as must have moved any ordinary man.

Captain Frost had at first assumed that blunt and direct manner which sat easily upon him as a rough soldier, and made no secret of the fact that he sought

his own profit, without regard to loyalty or allegiance. But, whether designedly, or carried away by the better feeling that swayed him for the moment, he caught the king's hand, and pressed it to his lips. I thought there was genuine emotion in his voice, and that he spoke with absolute sincerity.

"I have been your majesty's enemy, but am now your humble friend, and will show my friendship. Mr. Duncombe does not trust me yet, and thinks I know not what. He may be right to doubt me, but my acts will show me what I am."

"Mr. Duncombe," answered the king, "fears for his master what he would not fear for himself. For me, I willingly place my safety and honour in your keeping. Though I am now too poor to promise, the time will come—"

"When the time comes your majesty will not forget. I will do my part. I am not used to making speeches, or I might say more."

"I have heard many speeches that I liked less. Action is the soul of oratory."

"When it comes to action, sir, I am more at home, and, as I have told this gentleman, the sooner we come to action the better. There is nothing to gain by waiting."

"In that," I said, "I am quite agreed with Captain Frost. The vessel is ready, and our friends are quite prepared, and if the course proposed is practicable it may be carried out as easily now as a fortnight hence. It is not possible to tell what changes may take place, and my own authority may be revoked at any time. The nights are now dark, and there is no moon till one—"

"But this is too sudden," the king interposed; "I am unprepared—"

"Your majesty will bear with me," I said, seeing his fear in his face at the sudden prospect of this decisive step; "I would not take your decision out of your own hands; but to delay is only to incur

new danger, and add the misery of suspense to your other fears. I implore you, sir, to leave the matter in my hands. My own life is of little moment compared with what depends upon your majesty's; but I venture that."

"And I sail in the same cock-boat," cried Frost, with what I thought a show of temper; which he immediately suppressed; "but what of that? His majesty will be guided by his own judgment, giving some credit to those who are only his eyes and hands. Mr. Duncombe knows my entire mind, for we talked over the business fully last night, and he knows where to find me when your majesty has come to a decision. Suspicion breeds freely here, and it is best that we should not be seen too much together."

When Frost had left us, the king abandoned himself wholly to his fears, losing the control with which he had guarded his feelings through his entire interview with my new friend, and now showing me the secret working of his mind. The darkness of the future appalled and terrified him. Drifted now into this quiet bay out of the tempest that had so tossed and shattered his pride and hope, he dreaded again putting forth into the unknown seas, to be blown about by the stormy winds of accident and chance. He had almost come to that pass when men prefer rather to suffer than to strive, and when they are sunk so low that there seems to be a kind of consolation even in their very despair, knowing that the future has in store no greater pains than those they have already undergone.

I pitied him with my whole heart as I watched him sitting with his grey head resting on his white, wasted hand. I felt almost like a tempter, who would lead him from peace to ruin and despair.

"I have a presentiment," he said, "that I cannot put into words—I know not what it is—my own coward fears that misfortune has begotten and hope

cannot stifle. 'Tis too near, too sudden; I must have time to think. And yet to think is to doubt, to hesitate, to fail. Ambition could not tempt me—power has lost her charms. I have seen the emptiness of all the world can give or take away. But, my faithful friend, do you think we can trust him?"

"We have no other choice," I answered gravely; "but, indeed, I think he means sincerely. He knows too much, and might already have betrayed us had he pleased. Your majesty will pay a higher price than those who now employ him. Such men will venture much for that. He sounds honest."

"I have found at least one faithful heart," he said, pressing my hand, and the tears rising to his eyes. "Do what you will, I am content. Yet not rashly—and give me time to think."

"Your majesty will have time to think when you are surrounded by your friends."

I rose to my feet and walked to the window. The courtyard was deserted. A solitary sentinel stood at the gate through which we were to pass, and I could see him dozing over his musket.

"The steps are not many," I said, "between us and freedom. This bar is not thick, and Captain Frost will be able to do the rest. I will warn our friends, and I do not doubt that Providence that has so long frowned will smile again."

"God grant it! I have had a weary pilgrimage."

No sooner had I made known to Captain Frost the fact that the king had placed himself in my hands than his manner entirely changed, and he entered eagerly upon his arrangements. His face lighted, his eyes laughed, and a quick colour came into his cheeks.

"I thought it was all over," he said, "and the design was dead. I never thought when I looked in his face that he would venture, and I am certain had I stayed he would have still refused. We must not give him

time to change his mind. I would say to-night before he sleeps on it, if that were possible, but we cannot hurry till the scheme is ripe. The girl must give your friends timely notice to be ready at the tick of twelve to-morrow night. I hope, at least, they will bear themselves with indifferent discretion beyond their custom. I will myself see that there is a safe man on guard, who will take my word for gospel—I can manage that—I know the man ; but yours will be the hardest task.”

“What is that?”

“Putting life and courage in that poor anatomy that calls itself a king. Nay, I mean no offence, but if I get all that I am promised, and you know I work for nothing else, we must have the four sides a perfect square. Now let us go and see the ground where the battle will be fought that means so much for you and me.”

We went out into the courtyard, and walked up and down for a long time. The window of the king's chamber was not more than a man's height from the ground, and it was quite possible for him to reach the pavement without any assistance. Some sixty paces away was the postern by which Captain Frost had proposed to pass, and this space was generally deserted. It had the further advantage that it was not overlooked by any other window, from which it was likely we might be descried. Once beyond the gate, the danger would be almost at an end.

As we walked up and down, I would have given the world to have read my companion's heart. I had no reason to mistrust him, but upon his honesty everything depended, and his treachery meant ruin and dishonour. I had already viewed his conduct from every standpoint. Lying awake the whole night before, I had weighed every word he had spoken, and had ended by feeling that self-interest must make him faithful. But—and the hideous sug-

gestion presented itself again and again, even as his hand was laid familiarly upon my shoulder—if this was merely the tempter who was leading my master and myself toward destruction—if this was the incarnate danger I had feared!

I turned and looked at him. His frank, honest eyes met mine with a cheerful humour; his manner was free and unconstrained, and I was unable to discover any ground for my hesitation and doubt. And yet I hesitated and doubted. I felt that the temper of my mind had grown weak and dull, and that with the approaching crisis, the sense of my single responsibility and the great issues that hung upon my success or failure, had made me the creature of imaginary fears. Yet had the selection of the agent been left with me, and had he not forced himself upon me, as it were, at the sword's point, I do not think I should have been possessed by the same feeling of apprehension and mistrust. At the last moment chance and not design had seemed to have placed my feet upon this perilous path, and the hand that chance had provided was leading me along the dangerous edge of the precipice. The resolution which I had formed to shield the king in the event of failure, and which I had still kept before me with a single purpose, I had no longer the power to follow and to execute. Circumstance had been too strong, or I too weak—the king's safety and my own depended on the whim or purpose of a mercenary. There was no help for it—that was the only thought with which I could console myself, and with such thoughts in my heart I walked up and down before the grated window with Frost's hand resting upon my arm.

Before we separated we had arranged our plans for the following night. Melody Leigh was to advise our friends in Newport to expect our arrival, and to have everything in readiness for the reception of the king. Frost undertook to dispose the guard

in such way that there would be no difficulty in passing the gate, while I myself had little more to do than keep up the king's courage, and help him in his flight. If everything fell out as we hoped, I could foresee no obstacle to our success; the very simplicity of the design lessened the danger. Until the last moment there would be no fear of discovery, and then the only risk lay in the sentinel. But here Frost was clear and certain, and knowing his duty and authority, I felt that he had every ground for his perfect assurance.

It was late in the afternoon before I found Melody, and then in a broken moment I told her what I had done and what we had still to do. I shall never forget the manner in which she received the news, the flush of happiness that dyed her cheeks, the delight and joy that sparkled in her eyes. She could not contain herself; regardless of the risk we ran, she threw her arms about my neck and kissed me on the lips.

I held her close to my heart for a brief instant.

"It is nearly finished," she cried, "and you have saved the king. It almost turns my brain."

"Contain yourself, dear heart," I said. "I think the king is saved, but there is still something to fear. I shall not breathe till he is safe on board."

"It was worth while to live for this. I loved you always, but never as I love you now."

"You love me for what you think I have done."

"Nay, I love you for what you always were and are, and now I see, and the world will see, the real man I love."

"A poor fellow, Melody, but true and honest always."

"My knight of knights, *sans peur et sans reproche*."

"Whatever comes, I like to hear you say that."

"Whatever comes—For years I have put my loyalty before my love, but now that loyalty has

done its most, my love is all in all. Is that confession an unmaidenly one?"

"Tis like your brave and constant heart—the little girl I used to love when skies were bright and woods were green. I shall always remember it, and—I may be going to my death, Melody."

She started back and looked at me with a sudden change on her clear bright face; I read her woman's heart in her eyes.

"Never, never! Anything before that. And I have done this because I loved you—"

She stood looking at me blankly.

"I love you better thus—your weakness better than your strength. Courage, sweetheart, till now the doubts were always mine. My wife and I will yet have many a fireside tale to tell. When we meet again, Carisbrooke will be only a dream."

"How?"

"You must not return here. What you have to do will then be done, and you cannot help us further. It were a needless danger."

When the moment came when we were to separate I am certain she would willingly have given up all for which she had so looked and laboured. For the first time she realised the magnitude of the danger in which I was involved, and she saw this and this alone. Her constancy, that had so sustained and lifted her heart, deserted her wholly, and I must own that when she left me, my own feelings were at their lowest ebb. As she disappeared from my view down the corridor, I felt as though she was passing out of my life for ever, and with her all that I desired and loved. Shall I, I thought, ever see her again, and under what fortunes? What seeds are growing in the womb of time—what happy issues, what monstrous growths? But whatever happened I knew that I dare not now turn back. I must pursue the path I had taken wherever it might lead me. My hopes of happiness were now

all bound up with the king ; our fortunes were now united, and the fate of the kingdom was now the fate of one poor gentleman, who, till times mended, had little more than his sword to lean upon.

The events of the day, which I had thought concluded, were not yet over. I was destined to see Melody Leigh again.

I had paid my usual visit to the king, who was now in better spirits and possessed by brighter hopes, and after leaving him, had gone out into the air for a quiet walk before retiring to bed. I had not walked very long, passing up and down the length of the garden, when I heard my name called two or three times in a low voice. Filled with curiosity, I went to the small door that led to a covered passage, and standing there I saw in the dark, at some distance away, the flutter of a woman's dress. I was in no mood for adventures, but without much thought I turned in the direction of the voice, and after I had followed the unknown some good way, found myself, to my consternation, once more face to face with Melody Leigh. No sooner had my eyes lighted upon her face than I knew something had moved her deeply.

"What is wrong?" I cried. "Our friends have not failed us?"

"They are ready and expect you."

"Then why have you returned?"

"You have an enemy whom you told me you feared above all. I saw him long ago in Oxford."

I nodded gloomily. In my heart I knew what was coming.

"He is in Newport. I met him to-night."

"You met—"

"Colonel Death."

"Melody, this is a wild fancy. He cannot be here. I have heard he was in London, in Cromwell's service."

"He has not changed; once seen, he is never to be forgotten."

"Was he alone?"

"He had a friend with him in a brown cloak, but I could not see his face. Indeed I never paused, but returned as quickly as my feet could carry me. If he sees you—"

"All is lost," I answered; "if all—he has come a day too soon. Did he recognise you?"

"I think not—I am sure he did not."

"There is little that he fails to see, or he has greatly changed. But for whatever purpose he has come, his presence here will make our task no easier. Come what may, there is one promise that I must exact—perhaps the last."

"You will not ask me to leave you?"

"You know what I would have asked; you must not refuse. There may be—I hope there are not—dangers in store which we have not foreseen, but I shall have less to fear when I know that you are out of the reach of danger."

She looked at me swiftly.

"Is it not possible that Colonel Death might be—"

"I know what you would say—it is not possible. If Colonel Death is here on other business, there is only the danger of his recognising me, and that I can avoid; if he has come as a link in the chain that binds the king and me—if he is here as the part of a hideous plot too horrible to think of—but this is madness—no, we need not fear Sir John Death."

But I did fear him. After Melody had left me, promising to quit Carisbrooke at the earliest possible moment, I went straight to Frost, whom I thought to take quite unprepared, and so startle into the truth. I drew him aside when he was at supper and put the question boldly and without preface, whether he knew Colonel Death. Certainly of all

actors he must have been the most consummate. Though deadly issues hung upon his answer, he merely looked at me with a smile, and told me he had never even heard the name before. What cause had I to ask the question—did it touch the thing I knew of?—and when I answered that my reason was an idle one, he quietly resumed his supper, and talked of trivial matters with an air of unconcern.

Though my mind was satisfied, my fears were not allayed. Colonel Death had disappeared out of my life for years, and why, I asked, had he now appeared at this time when his presence meant so much? Was it design, was it accident and mere coincidence? If accident, I was still the master of events, and might still be guided by circumstances as they fell out, but if Colonel Death was here as part of a larger design, then the evil was done, and the sooner I secured my own retreat the better it would be for all concerned. But though this very fear had formerly possessed me, I could not now think it possible. Such a scheme was too deep, too villainous, for belief, and I gradually swung to the conclusion, though with many oscillations, that chance, wayward and strange, had brought my old friend and enemy within my reach again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RISING OF THE TIDE.

THE last day I spent in Carisbrooke in attendance upon the king, was of intolerable length, possessed as I was by dismal forebodings, and haunted by nameless fears. I started at every footfall; I halted at every sound. In every newcomer I looked to see the face of Sir John Death. Had I had any occupation or employment, I might have diverted my mind, but I had nothing to do but wait upon the slow running of the sand in the hour-glass. As I have said, our arrangements, simple as they were, were quite complete. Nothing remained to be done until dark, when the king was to cut the bar of the window with the file which Frost had provided, and this was only a simple task that could be done within an hour. I was to leave his chamber early, and when the time came—twelve by the Castle clock—to join Frost beneath the window. The night promised to be very dark, as the day had been cloudy with occasional showers, and I knew by looking at the calendar, that the moon did not rise, as I have already said, till one o'clock. Nothing could have been more favourable for our purpose, and I thought that it was a good omen. The king was cheerful beyond his wont, his former dread and despondency having now for the time given place to a cheerful courage, and almost gaiety. Two

or three times he jested at dinner with Mr. Osborne, a relation of my Lord Wharton, and one of the ushers who had always treated him with great consideration; and I was fearful lest his new accession of spirits might have been noticed, and given rise to some suspicion. But he was not unfrequently the subject of fitful moods, and his spriteliness passed without comment.

It was, however, a great relief to my mind when the day was over, and we were left alone as was the custom before he retired, for I knew on what an agitated sea of doubt and fear his soul was tossed. A crown and kingdom—nay, perhaps, his life, depended upon this throw. To take this step would have tried the nerve and courage of the strongest, but harassed by fortune and worn by suffering, it was not wonderful that he should shrink and fear. That he was able to control the inward passion that consumed him so completely had surprised me, but I did not know how long his pride and resolution might support him.

The agitation of his mind became very apparent when we were alone, and there was no longer any necessity for him to play his borrowed part.

He went over to the window and leaned his arm against the framework, watching the angry sunset and the blood-red sun for a moment throbbing in a sea of purple and crimson clouds. He did not speak, but I could see his feelings in his face. I went and joined him where he stood.

"To-morrow night," I said, "you will watch the sunset with your friends."

"Perhaps—we cannot read the portents in the sun and omens in the stars. We are blind and miserable men. Who can tell whether my life is not also setting in storm and tempest—this hope you bring me but a little gleam like that which now is fading even as I speak?"

"After the night comes morning."

"There are those for whom the morning never comes. I sometimes think it better to suffer than to strive."

"Your majesty's enemies would be pleased to hear you say that."

He turned suddenly.

"While I have strength they will not bend or turn me. Mr. Duncombe, you have read my heart and touched the spring that moves my resolution. To suffer patiently would mean the triumph of malignant hate—the ruin of my Church and people. That— I think of all that I have suffered, and I do not grudge the price I paid; and what that price has been I remember every hour of my life. I do not murmur at the sacrifice. I warned you that my love was fatal to my friends. Alas! I see them in the silent watches of the night—the young, the brave, the happy. And I am left—"

"With other friends as faithful."

"Heaven knows the truth of that. Whatever comes, my faithful friend, your king will not forget the loyal heart that braved so many dangers, and so cheerfully, to serve him. And now he is too poor to give him thanks—a king of shreds and patches."

"Misfortune only bound me closer to your majesty."

"And not a token of my love however poor. Stay— This is no comedy, although the royal player has no more power than he who frets and fumes an hour on the stage; to you and me 'tis real. Give me your sword."

I looked at him in wonder, thinking that for the moment he had taken leave of his senses. He saw my doubts in my countenance and answered them with a grave smile.

"Nay, this is serious earnest. 'Tis but the pity of it that would raise a smile."

I drew the weapon from the sheath and handed him the hilt.

"'Tis long since I have felt the edge of steel that makes and unmakes kings. This sword has seen honourable service, but was never more fitly used than now by him whom it has served so faithfully. Kneel, my friend."

I never dreamt for a single instant of his meaning. The situation was so strange and pitiful that I never guessed the thought that was in his mind, but still stood lost in wonder. His own manner was quite grave and earnest.

"This is the last command that I may ever give. The king was once the fountain of all honour. Kneel."

I knelt down before him in the dying sunset, and presently felt the sword blade laid upon my shoulder. At the touch the tears started to my eyes, for I now saw what had moved him, and though it seemed the very mockery of honour, my heart thrilled with pride and pleasure.

"Rise, Sir Thomas Duncombe, loyal heart and faithful arm, the honoured servant of a loving master. This act confers, perhaps, no favour now, but shows the love I bear you."

I grasped his hand and pressed it to my lips, for my words altogether failed me. I think he was ashamed of the emotion that he himself betrayed, for he walked to the end of the room, and for a little while I could not see his face. Outside the great clock struck eight, and I counted each stroke in the silence of the chamber. The king turned to me gravely.

"Four hours more, and we shall know all."

"And in the meantime," I said, "your majesty must not despair. I am full of hope for our success. On the stroke of twelve you will hear me call, and do not move till then."

"Do not forget your arms. I am afraid—"

"Of what? Not Captain Frost?"

"No, no—myself, I think. I hope I may not see my fears in actual shape."

"When we meet again all will be well. I shall come with a new day and new fortune."

"If Heaven wills."

He wrung my hand, speaking some broken words that I did not catch, and I went into the ante-chamber, where I spent some time, as I usually did, for I was desirous not to depart from my custom. Here I found Captain Frost very gay and almost boisterous, but we had no conversation together, though a look passed between us which I very well understood.

After a while I retired to my own apartment, where I determined to wait until the hour upon which we had agreed to meet. My blood was running now like quick-silver in my veins, and throbbed loudly in my temples. Now that the time had almost arrived, I could not control my excitement or master my eagerness. All had passed off successfully during the day, nor had anything occurred to arouse my apprehension or occasion me alarm. If the appearance of Colonel Death was sinister and of evil augury, he had delayed too long, and I had no cause to fear that his coming might impede our success. Indeed nothing seemed to me now more certain than that we should succeed—and yet though I buoyed myself up with this assurance, at every point I was met by a presentiment of evil which I could not put into words, or trace to any cause.

I lighted my lamp and threw myself into my chair where I sat patiently till my usual hour of retiring to rest. All was prepared for flight; my arms lay on the table with my hat and cloak, and I had finished my supper which had been brought to my own room. I had determined to extinguish my light at the customary hour, and pass the rest of the time in darkness, for I knew that the smallest sign of anything out of the ordinary might attract attention, and I decided to run no risk.

I could have found my way with my eyes closed.

My door opened upon a flight of stone steps a little removed from the entrance to the king's apartments, and led by several turns, somewhat precipitously, to the courtyard at a point where I knew no sentinel had been placed. The door was fastened by a bolt from the inside, and moved very easily, and hardly more than twenty yards away was the window of the king's bed-chamber. Nothing could have been more favourable for my purpose, and I had a hundred times considered every detail.

At ten o'clock I put out my lamp, and walked to the window. A fine, small rain was falling with a prospect of more, for the wind was rising and the night was very dark. It was not possible to see farther than a few paces away, and I returned thankfully to my seat, for the condition of the night was an important element in our success.

I shall never forget my feelings as I sat there in the darkness, my nerves sharpened to the utmost, and listening to every sound that filled me with alarm. Those two hours seemed a century. I thought they would never pass. There was no fear the mind can suggest that did not take shape before me. I endeavoured to control my vagrant fancies, but was unequal to the task. I rose and walked to the window again and again, for my agitation was such that I could not rest. The suspense was intolerable.

The time was creeping slowly on. Eleven o'clock had already struck: there was only an hour more.

Once I thought I heard a footstep outside my door and pausing there—I could almost have sworn I heard it; but though I listened, it did not move again. I had hardly the courage to discover whether this was only fancy, but at last I rose, and threw my door wide open. I could see nothing, and as I closed it and returned to my seat, I smiled to think how childish I was growing. I know now that I was wrong.

Had I made another step, I might have had the traitor by the throat, and saved myself from hours of anguish. Had I known—alas! we purchase knowledge with our tears.

For what I am about to write I do not expect to gain my reader's credence, but I set down in all soberness what my eyes witnessed, and what I shall never forget so long as I live. I sometimes think that I slept, and that the scene my eyes looked on was builded of my dreams; but that I cannot tell. I know that never in my waking moments was any object more distinct, or any picture more clear and vivid. Had it passed before me—the actors in the flesh, the place in stone and mortar—I could not have seen it clearer, or with an apprehension more distinct. Once or twice only have I spoken of it before, but my hearers, though they did not doubt my truth, have thought imagination played with memory; but this I know is not the case. I can offer no explanation; I can merely set down the simple truth, and let you judge the rest.

A good while had passed, and I sat in my chair with my head in my hands and my elbows resting on the table. My eyes were not closed, but were open, looking blankly upon the darkness. The room was suddenly filled with a soft, dim light, not strong, but sufficiently clear to see a good way. Instead of the wall, which I thought to see opposite to me, I looked down the vista of a great and venerable hall, filled with a hushed, expectant multitude. I saw their faces—citizens and soldiers. I should even know them now. At the upper end was an array of judges, very stern and motionless, and one in the centre—I knew him afterwards—clothed in a scarlet robe, and speaking in a solemn voice. But there was one figure on which my eyes lighted and were riveted—a solitary figure at the bar, seated in a velvet chair—the central figure in that great and awed assembly, a prisoner on trial for his

life. I dared not move; I could not breathe. Then he turned his head slowly, and his eyes fell upon mine.

I recognised the king.

At that moment I heard the voice of the speaker—"Make silence. Clerk, read the sentence."

I heard no more, but rose to my feet with a great cry. The spell was broken and the vision passed into the darkness.

"Great God!" I cried. "I am going mad. I have not slept, and no dream was ever so strange and terrible. Or is this a warning that Heaven has sent to bid us stop in time?"

Great beads of perspiration stood upon my brow; my limbs were shaking so that I could hardly stand; my panic had entire possession of me. I could not have stirred a finger to have saved my life. I thought, perhaps, the vision might appear again, and with that thought I strained my eyes and sought to pierce the intense darkness. But the cloud did not move; only the words rang once and again in my ears—"Read the sentence, read the sentence," till I found myself repeating them with my dry, parched lips.

Had what I had seen been less strange and monstrous, I think I should have altogether abandoned my design, but what I saw I believed to be beyond all credit and belief. At that time it was not possible for me to believe by any stretch or effort of imagination that this scene could take place in real life, and that the shadowy figures would play their part in the living drama that my own eyes should witness. Whatever happened, the king was still above the law; it was the hand of the assassin, not the arm of justice robed in state, that he had to fear. As my panic cooled, this thought encouraged me, and I came rapidly to the conclusion that alarm and apprehension had crowded my dream with this awful and fan-

tastic scene. Of late I had been resting ill, and my nights had been broken by dreams as wild, but not so terrible, as this.

But the time had now come when I was called upon to decide. While I stood, swayed this way and that between doubt and terror, I heard the sound of midnight tolling, and each laboured stroke tossed and blown in the windy darkness. At the first note I was recalled to life and action; the garment of fear dropped from about me, and I at once became master of myself. I caught up my arms—I had primed my pistol freshly—and went to the head of the staircase, where I stood some time listening. Everything was perfectly still, and searching for the iron rail of the balustrade, I made my way cautiously but swiftly down the stair. I easily found the bolt of the door, and drew it back without the least noise.

As I opened it, the night wind blew strongly in my face, and I was about to step across the threshold, when a dark figure almost fell against me, and caught me by the shoulder. I stepped back in surprise and alarm, but prepared to strike on the first motion.

"Not a word," cried a voice; "it is I, Winthrop Frost. I have been waiting for you."

"Has anything gone wrong?"

"All is well. I feared that you might oversleep yourself."

"There was little danger of that. Have you seen the sentinel?"

"He is waiting for me now, digesting a fine story and hoping to make profit out of it. He is mine to the finger-tips; all is safe and ready. I have only to get my sword and will join you in an instant."

"You are not going back?"

"I cannot leave a faithful friend behind me. Get to the window and help his majesty to the ground. Before you have finished I shall have joined you; then farewell to Carisbrooke."

"You must not go," I cried; "you may ruin all. You will not need a weapon."

"There is no danger. I could not travel without my trusty counsellor. You will be ready to start when I return. Keep well within the shadow of the wall."

Before I could speak he had disappeared, and I was left alone. His action was so natural if ill-considered, that no shadow of suspicion crossed my mind. I did not then know that this was only part of a long-considered plan, and that I was merely the puppet by whom a diabolical plot was to be carried out. But I knew the king must be awaiting me with feverish impatience and anxiety, and therefore keeping under the shelter of the wall, I did as Frost had said, and came beneath the window without further pause. All was dark and still but for the swaying gusts that swept among the roofs and battlements, and sang through every niche and crevice.

When I had got close under the window, I saw that the bar had been removed, though so strange was my condition of mind that I think I should have been rejoiced to have found it still intact, and that the king had changed his mind. But now with the evidence of his intention to escape, there was no retreat. We had already passed the perilous edge of decision and must accept the consequences.

Though I had walked very softly, I think he had heard my footsteps, for he called out my name in a low voice that trembled with emotion.

"'Tis I, your majesty; I am here."

"An age has passed," he said, "since we parted. Is all well?"

"All is well."

"Then into God's hands I commit my keeping, and if it is His will I shall never look on Carisbrooke again."

With an agility which I should never have ex-

pected, he came through the window and alighted upon the ground beside me. He caught hold of my hand and pressed it in his own in a silence more eloquent than words. After that he looked round and then turned to me with a whisper of alarm.

"We are alone. Where is Frost?"

"He is gone to fetch his sword. He will be here directly."

"Great God! I am lost. My fears are realised."

"Lost!" I cried.

"Lost. I know now that he is a traitor. I dreamt that I should find you here alone with these very words upon your lips—the end—the end. Oh! Duncombe, we are quite undone; my dream is coming true."

"It is now too late to return, sir," I said, knowing that he was quite overcome by his terror. "We must wait here patiently for a little. I believe the man is honest. But if he is the designing villain your majesty thinks him"—I drew my sword, which I hoped I should not have occasion to use.

"Nay, whatever happens there must be no more bloodshed. We cannot fight with Destiny. Here is the end of all."

"We have no reason to despair," I said. "I left him but now, and I saw nothing in his manner that would lead me to suspect. Stay—he is coming."

I heard the faint sound of footsteps in the distance, and a great weight was lifted off my heart, for the urgency of the king's fear had found an echo in myself. I now again breathed freely. Frost had kept his word.

The footsteps halted some way off, before I could see the figure in the night, and I thought I heard the murmur of whispering voices. And then before I could recover from my surprise, not one, but two persons appeared almost close beside me. For an instant I was staggered at the sight, but immediately

after I leaped between the king and the approaching danger.

"Captain Frost?" I cried.

"An eager frost, a nipping frost," said a deep voice that was still fresh in my memory.

At that I knew all was over. Whether this plan was that of Colonel Death or his master, Cromwell, I did not know, but I knew that it had been successful, and the king was ruined. My friends had been cajoled and hoodwinked, and I had been sacrificed to no purpose. While I had been preparing my plans in secret and watching every step I took, they had been laughing at my open folly and waiting for the moment when they would find me in the toils.

"An eager frost, a nipping frost," cried Colonel Death, with a sneer. "You are still at your mad pranks, but this is treason now."

"It may be what you please," I cried, "but if you move another step I will run you through. Keep back. I will not trust you, Colonel Death."

The king was now close to the wall, and I stood before him guarding him with my body, and determined to keep his assailants at the sword's point. I had now no doubt that assassination was intended and it was his life that was aimed at. I was determined that this should not be done secretly, but at the very first moment I should call for help, which I knew that I should not fail to find. But I still hesitated to take that step.

"Come, Frost," cried Colonel Death, "I know this paladin of old. This matter cannot wait for argument; I have an ancient score to settle."

I could not see his sword, but I felt it strike against my own, and at the touch I cried out with all the strength of my voice. My cry echoed and re-echoed, and almost in an instant awakened a thousand voices in answer.

"God curse you! You will not foil me now," cried Colonel Death.

The king had moved forward, but I unceremoniously pushed him back with my left arm, while at the same time I endeavoured to avoid the point of Death's weapon. His companion, who till now had kept in the background, joined him in the attack, and I felt that I could not long sustain an encounter against two men so desperate. I repeated my cry, and while my voice still rang out, Death, disregarding my weapon, endeavoured to pass behind me. Careless of my own peril, which was certainly extreme, I turned upon him desperately, knowing his purpose, and lunged full at his exposed person with all the strength of my arm. The point struck him fair beneath the breast, and the blade passed through his body. He never uttered a sound, but fell like a log at full length upon the ground. I heard the king call out as he fell, but I heard also the welcome sound of running feet and voices calling in alarm, and I knew that the pressing danger would presently be past.

I could not disengage my sword blade, and releasing the hilt I turned upon Frost, unarmed as I was. I sprang upon him in the darkness, guarding myself with my outstretched hands, and got so near as to touch him upon the breast. But the next moment I felt a sharp and agonising pain, that took all the strength out of my limbs. Then I lay on the ground, and strange faces were bending over me, lights were flashing, and voices were filling the night with hideous discord. But I was happy, for in the growing darkness with which I fought, I heard some one cry that the king was safe.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ENDS THE HISTORY.

WHEN I returned to consciousness, the daylight was creeping grey and cold through the narrow window of the cell in which I lay. When my eyes fell upon the bare walls and the grated window, I suddenly remembered everything down to the moment when I heard Colonel Hammond's order to carry me hither. I had been left here either to live or die without further thought or care, only someone had bound up my wound roughly with a kerchief, and thereby stopped the bleeding, which must have been profuse, for my clothes were quite stiff with congealed blood. I could not move my left arm at all, and my head was racked with a burning pain. But my mind was quite clear. I could now look back upon the past like one who has merely survived the shipwreck of all his fortunes, and in whom the passion of struggle and the hope of safety is wholly dead. I could take up the threads of every broken incident and weave the entire story with a calm, dispassionate mind. The shock of failure had broken my spirit and deprived me even of the power to regret. I was now no longer an actor, but a spectator, and as a spectator I could see the hands that had moved the puppets, and directed the progress of the tragedy down the miserable path

of folly, blindness and credulity. It was strange ; it was pitiful. To conceive the idea of destroying the king by the very hands of those who would willingly have laid down their lives for him, betrayed such wicked ingenuity as almost staggered belief. But I had now no doubt that this was from the first moment the design of those who were privy to the plot. They had played upon the hopes of my friends ; they had suggested the scheme which seemed so easy of execution, yet so pregnant with fatal possibilities of evil, and they had led me, like a simple youth, into the very snare I had expected. At the outset it was possible they had no further object than to find a pretext for their further designs upon the king, but I had no doubt that last night Colonel Death had sought his life, and he had escaped only by a miracle. His life, indeed, was saved, but they had gained the pretext they sought, and whither were their footsteps tending ? Whither—who could tell ? I had helped to ruin the best and kindest master in the world, with no thought of myself and a single eye to his honour and safety. And then pursuing another line of thought, I traced my own motives and conduct from the moment I had entered upon the scheme till I had seen it broken and discovered. I was satisfied that I could not have acted otherwise than I did. The employment of Frost was forced upon me, and my only regret was that he had escaped the punishment that had overtaken his confederate in this villainy. Of the two I thought him the greater and more plausible rogue. The character of the man I had killed, and who had been at once my friend and enemy, was so composed of good and evil mixed inextricably in one curious medley that he was hardly responsible for his acts, but the other was moved only by a cold purpose and consummate hypocrisy. Come what may, I thought, in the end we all go to our own place, and I—I shall find my

own place also, and in the meantime the chances are altogether in favour of my finding it speedily. I should prove a dangerous witness, and they will not hesitate to destroy the evidence.

My thoughts were at this point interrupted by the entrance of the warder, who, seeing the condition I was in, left me, and some time after returned with a surgeon, who attended to my wounds and gave me some comfort.

I was, however, able to learn nothing of what had taken place since last night, and I remained in this condition of ignorance for nearly three weeks, by which time my wound had quite healed. But I was led to believe, from sundry hints that were dropped by my silent gaoler, that I should have to pay for my undertaking with my life; and, indeed, I expected nothing else. I awaited every day a summons to the informal tribunal that would precede my sentence, for I knew that I should at least be condemned by some form of law. My voice could not pass beyond the circle of my judges, and if there was any further inquiry, the fate of Sir John Death was sufficient reason for my condemnation.

But as the days passed, and nothing was done, I became more hopeful either that a powerful interference was being made on my behalf, or that my enemies were satisfied that I had accomplished what they had designed. I learned almost by accident that the king had been removed from Carisbrooke to a place of greater security—the first result of the mad enterprise in which I had allowed myself to become engaged—and that he had passed from under the authority of Parliament into their hands, whose unconscious agent I had allowed myself to become.

I say I gained this knowledge almost by accident, but of my friends I could learn nothing. During all this time my imprisonment was of the most rigorous description; it was clearly intended that I should

have no opportunity of communicating with any outside. This solitary confinement tried me greatly, nor do I think I could have borne it much longer without suffering a lasting injury to my spirits and temperament.

At the end of nearly a month Colonel Hammond unexpectedly visited me for the first time. He was, I now discovered, a man of a very noble spirit. While he had formerly treated me with a coldness almost slighting and disdainful, his manner now expressed that courtesy and kindness with which an honourable soldier treats the enemy whom he has vanquished in a fair field. I could see that he had a higher regard and respect for my real character than for that which I had assumed. With a very real considerateness he made no allusion to what had taken place, until the very end of our interview, and then what he said fell from him merely by accident. He informed me that what had been done with regard to myself had been done in pursuance of orders which he had no power to question.

"I have now," he continued, "been relieved from this unpleasant duty. I am now directed to send you forthwith to London, where, I understand, an inquiry is to be made into all matters touching what has recently transpired here. I trust you may be able to find such answer as may satisfy your accusers; but, in the meantime, I can only say that had I known I had the honour of entertaining that Mr. Duncombe, of whose conduct I heard with pleasure last year as a fellow-countryman, I had saved you much pain, and the king perhaps—"

"What?" I asked, seeing him pause.

"His crown and his life."

He looked at me with grave meaning, and an expression full of sympathy, and then left me without another word.

The next day I was carried to London where I was lodged in the Tower.

And now I have come to that scene from which my life took new shape and colour, and out of which I went forth into a future with new fears and hopes, and the certain knowledge that the cause I followed was for ever lost, and the king I loved was king no more. At this point, when the current of my life passed into another channel, I found the great happiness of my life. At a time when I seemed to have lost sight of love and hope for ever, I regained both, and since then, love, shining like a star upon a sea of storm and calm, has filled my life with joy and crowned my days with peace. In the great sorrow that then befel me my love sustained and comforted me, and helped me to bear a burden that otherwise had proved well-nigh insupportable. For not long after this I saw my vision pass before my eyes—judges, audience and victim—and listened to the sentence that I had heard at midnight spoken by no earthly lips. I saw, passing from the judgment-hall to the scaffold, my noble master, whom I felt that I perhaps had assisted to betray. But this was afterwards.

One afternoon, while I still lay in the Tower, now quite hopeless, and almost beyond feeling, I was carried out without any previous warning, not knowing and hardly caring what my destination was to be. I thought it likely that I was about to undergo the examination to which I had been looking forward and for which I had been preparing myself. I was not surprised, therefore, when I was brought to Whitehall, but only at the manner of my bringing, for there seemed to be in that something almost secret and mysterious. Nor was my wonder lessened when I was led into one of the private apartments, and left there with only a formal person in a grey suit, who wrote at a table in the centre of the room, and who looked up for a moment to regard me curiously.

He pointed with his quill to a vacant chair, and then went on with his writing, without paying any further heed to my presence. I remember wondering what he wrote, and whether it concerned me, while I sat watching him pursing his lips, as his scratching and scrambling pen went rapidly over the paper. For a while I thought this diligent scribe was so intent upon the business before him that he had forgotten my being here, but twice looking up quickly, I caught his eyes fixed on me with an expression of curiosity or something akin to that. The second time our eyes met, I suddenly burst forth—

"You can tell me, I presume, for what reason I am brought here?"

"I can tell you nothing, sir."

"Even how much longer I must wait?"

"Even that."

There was a dry smile upon his lips which I thought was not unfriendly.

"I have waited so long," I said, "that I grow impatient. You see—"

"I see," he said, laying down his pen, and looking at me fairly, "that you would make me talk whether I would or no. Briefly, it is not permitted."

"I am sorry to hear that," I said, "for my conversation has been limited for some time. I am no inveterate gossip, but—"

"I will hear what you have to say, sir," said a deep voice behind me.

The secretary rose to his feet, and I, turning round, involuntarily rose also. Cromwell stood in the doorway with one hand upon the scarlet curtain and the other thrust into his vest. I recognised him in an instant, for he was little changed. His face was perhaps harder, and his hair a little thinner, but otherwise he hardly looked a day older than when I had seen him last.

I stood in speechless astonishment. He seemed a little amused at my confusion, and coming into

the room, whispered some words in the ear of his secretary, who left us. He then seated himself in the vacant chair, and resting his hands on its arms, leaned slightly forward, and looked at me with earnestness. For my own part I could not describe my feelings—admiration for the bold and daring spirit, loathing and aversion for the hypocrite who had betrayed my master and his own. I thought I had learned to read men, but this man perplexed and baffled me.

"Have you nothing to say?" he said at length.

I remained silent.

"When we last parted you were setting out on a fool's errand. That is five years since. You see where we stand now. I would have been your friend."

"I do not regret my choice," I said. "What I have done I would do again."

He did not seem to hear my words, but continued to look at me with the look of one who would know the secrets of my mind.

"I have not forgotten that night nor the service which you rendered me. I am not an altogether ungrateful man, nor wholly unmindful of the past, and now you stand in that position where no man in England can save your life but myself only. God, who exalts the humble and debases the proud for His wise purposes, has seen meet to entrust me with some authority. I am your friend."

"Sir," I cried hotly, "you can never be my friend!"

A look of anger swept across his face; his brow reddened, and his eyes gathered light at my words.

"What?"

"I am," I continued, "but a humble gentleman, who has hitherto tried to keep his hands clean and his honour bright. I am ready when you will to answer for what I have done, and life is not so

sweet that I should sacrifice my self-respect to gain it. You are not ignorant what I mean. I trusted in your faith; my friends relied upon your honesty. Your faith and honesty have brought me here, and the king to that you have prepared for him."

"This is madness, sir."

"The simple truth," I answered, my blood now at boiling point and my fear lost in my indignation; "the simple truth. The letter that you wrote was written to your friend. Him you deceived, us you destroyed, and while your words of grace were running smoothly from your pen, your tools were already prepared and your base designs completed in your mind. Colonel Death was your right hand."

I saw that it was only by a great effort that he controlled himself, but this he did completely. While I was still pouring out my wild words, he rose from his seat and walked a little distance away. Then he turned to me calmly.

"I have already given my promise with regard to you, but it is not that promise alone which has enabled me to listen to you without anger and to reply without bitterness. I have ever loved to hear plain speech when it was spoken with sincerity and dictated by zeal for the truth. Experience has still something to teach you, and this not among the least lessons, that even a good man's reputation is often at the mercy of the meanest and most depraved. I am not ignorant of the letter to which you refer. The hand that wrote that letter deserves more than you can say: but what shall I say whose name has been thus used, and whose friend has since justly refused to look upon me as a friend? I do not murmur; I will not complain. Hatred and obloquy have been my portion in the path that I have chosen, but upon that path I shall not fail nor falter."

"I cannot believe," I cried—

"I cannot compel your belief. God alone can try the heart and read the secrets of the spirit. I am but a poor labourer in the vineyard whose day's work will soon be ended, but it is even with such unworthy hands as mine that the Master's work is done. But that work is not done in such manner or spirit as theirs who led your friends to think that they could use me to destroy the labour of my life."

"You tell me," I cried—

"I tell you nothing," he said, again interrupting me. "I am not of those who seek to make their goings straight in the eyes of the multitude or fear the mire that smirches him who walks upon the high-road of integrity. As I have said, I do not find fault with your suspicions; a wiser man had done the same. But your suspicions, nay, even your enmity, will not prevent my helping you."

Is this, I asked myself, only part of that magnificent hypocrisy which has already wrought me and my friends so much mischief, and are there reasons why he is anxious to purchase my goodwill? Or does he indeed speak the language of truth and magnanimity? I did not then know, nor do I yet know, though Time has not removed my doubts. That secret also is one of those which will only be made clear when all things are revealed. But his denial, indirect as it was, staggered me, and his calm, strong manner led me for the moment almost to believe him. Whether he lied or spoke the truth he never took his eyes off my face. He saw that my conviction was shaken.

"In this, at least," he said, "you cannot suspect that I have anything to gain, or further ends to serve. I desire only to repay the debt I owe you. At some risk I have succeeded in hushing up the affair at Carisbrooke, and your own action there. I have incurred some share of odium in doing this, and made some sacrifice, but that is a small favour which

is conferred at no cost. There is no condition attached to this gift, but such as a wise man will cheerfully accept—to stay at home and keep the peace.”

“I hope,” I said, “I am not so blind as not to see the value of the gift you offer me.”

“Then you accept it?”

“When you tell me plainly that I have accused you wrongly.”

“Few men are unwilling to accept their lives,” he answered drily. “Mr. Duncombe, I am not blind to the feeling that prompts you, though I esteem it folly. I honour that blind fidelity which binds you to a lost cause and a faithless king—well, I had not intended to say that. I now assure you that you may accept my offer without loss of honour or injury to your feelings. Were all men as faithful as yourself, the steel that is to-day bare had never been unsheathed, and the sickle, not the sword, had reaped the fields where many godly men have fallen for their conscience sake. You are now at liberty. There are some necessary forms with which you must comply, but they will offer no difficulty. I am glad we now stand on equal terms. There is one thing more,” he continued, with a sudden change of manner, being now very cold and hard; “should we meet again you will find that my hostility is not less urgent than my friendship. I will not twice pay a debt I have once discharged.”

I remained silent. I knew that he had done me a great favour, but I had not the heart to thank him. He went over to the door by which he had entered and halted there.

“I have not been your only friend,” he said; “there is another whom you may find even more exacting than myself.”

“Another?” I cried in wonder.

“Another who has wearied me on your behalf, and,” he added after a pause, “who loves me even

as little as yourself. Whether you will thank me for what I have done the future alone can show, but your friend is waiting impatiently, and must see you now."

He left me with a smile upon his face that I could not understand, nor could I imagine for a moment who had interested himself so earnestly on my behalf, and, as seemed the case, with so much success. But throughout this whole interview I had been so puzzled that I was altogether at sea, and hardly certain whether I was quite awake. I had looked for no such ending; I had hoped for no such escape.

The early service that I had done General Cromwell had long since passed from my memory. I had sacrificed nothing by accepting his kindness. I had, indeed, accepted his assurance while my mind was far from certain that he spoke the truth. But I had little time given me to consider the matter now. Even while I still stood in the middle of the room, the door was opened, and I heard a quick, glad cry. I started back in surprise, but almost before I knew, Melody Leigh was in my arms, and her dear head upon my bosom.

"Forgive me, Tom! it was for your sake only."

"What is there that I should forgive?"

"That I should forget my loyalty in my love. But love is all in all."

THE END

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